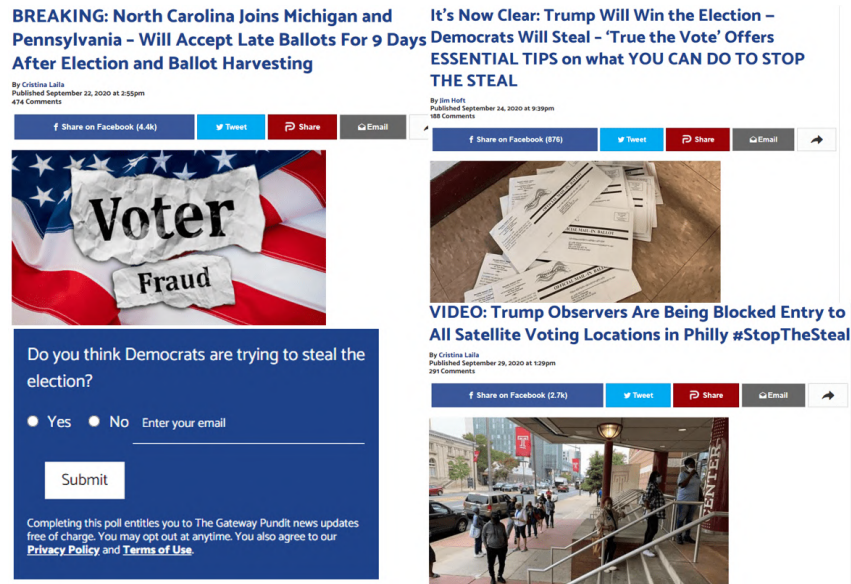Figure 3.34: The Gateway Pundit articles mentioning "Stop the Steal" in September. Left, a September 22 article and poll. Top right, an article from September 24. Bottom right, an article from September 29.[69]

right-wing media outlets, were repeatedly pushing the Stop The Steal narrative online. Some of these narratives were accompanied by more specific claims about individual state irregularities (such as alleging they were not counting ballots), while others were more general statements that the Democrats could not have won the election fairly.

Besides conservative pundits, a handful of conservative politicians began to amplify #StopTheSteal immediately after the election. One was Marjorie Taylor Greene, a Republican Congressional candidate in Georgia who won her race in the House of Representatives. Greene leveraged multiple social media platforms simultaneously to spread Stop the Steal messages and promote herself. She posted a Stop the Steal petition on both Facebook and Twitter that, once completed, redirected to a donation page. The petition spread in various Facebook Groups, including an anti-Whitmer Michigan Group.

Stop the Steal Groups on Facebook were created at least as early as November 4, 2020. One Group, STOP THE STEAL, quickly swelled to hundreds of thousands of members. In addition to providing a place where users shared election-related conspiracy theories, the Group served as a hub to find various Stop the Steal rally Facebook events across the country, some hosted by other entities. This primary Group was shut down by Facebook on November 5 at 2:00 pm ET, with media reports suggesting it was due to content inciting violence;[71] data from an EIP CrowdTangle archive shows that it had at least 7,000 posts with slightly

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Figure 3.35: A collage of some of the top conservative pundits using #StopTheSteal on November 3 and 4. On TikTok, a user filmed a live video of Charlie Kirk using the hashtag #StopTheSteal, indicative of the cross-platform nature of this content.
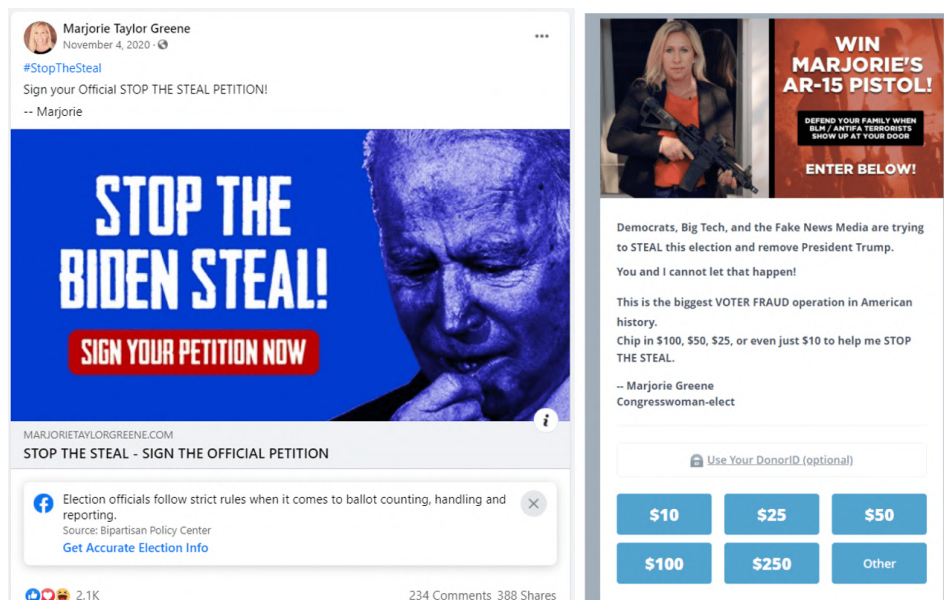

Figure 3.36: Left, a post from Representative Majorie Taylor Greene, who heavily promoted #StopTheSteal. In one of her posts, the petition led to her donation site, right.
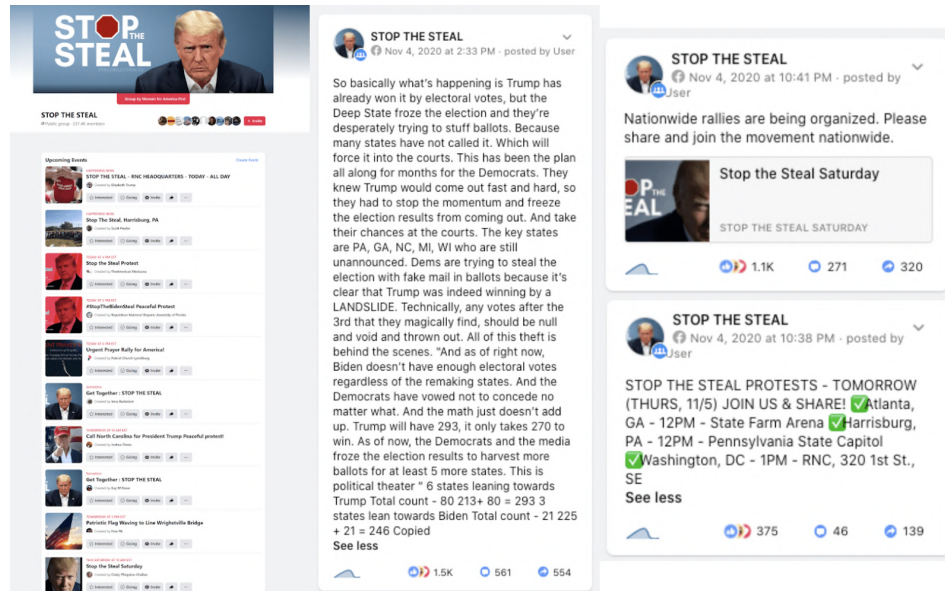
over 800,000 interactions.

Figure 3.37: Image of several posts in the STOP THE STEAL Group on Facebook. The event page of the Group listed upcoming events in different locations hosted by various entities.

Facebook Groups like STOP THE STEAL helped solidify the Stop the Steal movement's offline component. For example, on November 5, Facebook events were scheduled for locations including California; Virginia; Washington, DC; Pennsylvania; and Florida. StopTheSteal.us—a website created by Ali Alexander—and its newsletter also helped to rally people to different locations around the country. Inflammatory rhetoric was common; for example, in a since-removed tweet on December 7, Alexander tweeted that he was "willing to give my life for this fight." The Arizona Republican Party retweeted, adding, "He is. Are you?"[72]

Coverage of Stop the Steal in conservative media outlets varied. In the first two weeks after the election, Fox News had two article headlines mentioning Stop the Steal in the context of news items (Facebook's STOP THE STEAL Group takedown and an incident at a rally).[73] In contrast, more niche right-leaning fringe outlets covered it uncritically, and at times seemingly supportively; for example, on One America News Network (OANN), coverage of Stop the Steal included a since-removed article outlining how voters were holding Stop the Steal rallies in multiple states because of alleged election irregularities.[74] The outlet had steady coverage of the movement, telling viewers how to rally and broadcasting an exclusive interview with organizers declaring that they will "Fight on."[75]

Stop the Steal rallies at times morphed into broader pro-Trump post-election protests—for example, the Million MAGA March in DC on November 14 was heav-

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ily promoted by Stop the Steal influencers, and the insurrection on January 6 was promoted by StopTheSteal.us. In an email on December 21 from StopTheSteal.us, the January 6 protest was heavily advertised, stating, "#StopTheSteal wants **ALL Patriots** to stand up with us in D.C. on what should be a historic day, January 6, 2021...StoptheSteal.us stands ready to FIGHT BACK with this **historic protest...we will NOT ALLOW our Republic to be stolen from us!**" (bolding theirs).

Figure 3.38: Image of a December 21 email from the StopTheSteal.us newsletter.

The Stop the Steal movement's enduring power likely stems from several factors. The phrase is all-encompassing of various other false claims and narratives pushed about the election, providing an opportunity for many constituencies to gather both virtually, and in real life, under one banner. Stop the Steal content spread not only on Facebook, but also on Twitter, Parler, and Telegram. Because of the many figures pushing the narrative across social media and on websites, the movement was robust enough to survive individual takedowns of misleading electoral content and targeted deplatforming.

#Maidengate

Many narratives co-occurred with Stop The Steal, alleging a variety of forms of voter fraud. Some of them rehashed allegations made in elections past;

for example, the hashtag #DeadVoters claimed that dead people had voted in the election via mail-in ballots (this peaked on November 11, 2020). Another hashtag in this vein was #Maidengate,[76] which began on November 9, 2020, via hashtagged tweets from an account alleging that a Michigan mother's vote had been stolen by an impersonator using her maiden name. The poster claimed to know several people who had discovered that a ballot in their name had been cast in another state. She described this as intentional fraud, and called on voters to check if they had been registered in multiple states due to past addresses or name changes.

The claim of mass manipulation via maiden names, absent any evidence besides anecdotal hearsay, was subsequently promoted on Twitter by Ali Alexander, who created a website dedicated to the hashtag to try to collect evidence of voter fraud. He promoted the Maidengate conspiracy on Periscope, gathering 41,000 viewers. #Maidengate chatter and content from the original tweeter's website appeared on Reddit and Facebook[77] and the hashtag appeared approximately 1,800 times on Parler. By November 12, the Twitter account was suspended.
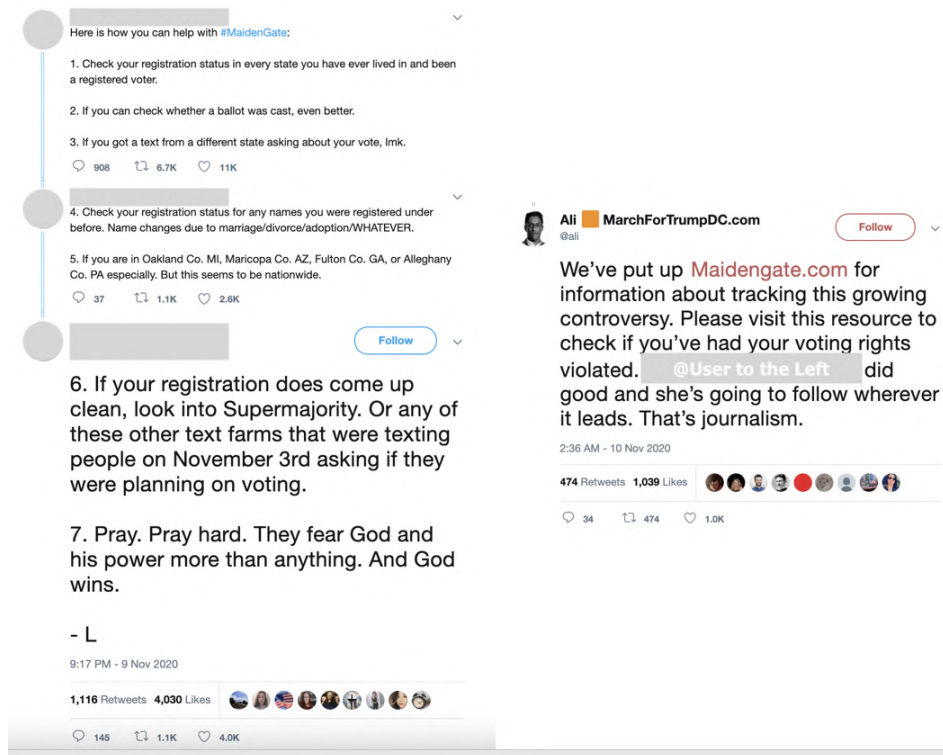

Figure 3.39: Left, tweets that precipitated #Maidengate; right, Ali Alexander's tweet promoting the Maidengate conspiracy.

#Maidengate went sufficiently viral that it generated attention from major media outlets focused on debunking election misinformation, including the *New York*

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Times. As the *Times* noted,

> "Soon, the claim that unauthorized people had cast votes under the
> maiden names of real voters started trending online. From Monday to
> Wednesday morning, more than 75,000 posts pushing #MaidenGate
> appeared on Twitter, peaking at 2,000 between 2:10 and 2:15 a.m. on
> Tuesday, according to Dataminr, a tool for analyzing social media
> interactions. Beyond Twitter, the #MaidenGate rumors spread to
> Facebook, YouTube and groups associated with Stop the Steal, which
> have promoted the false narrative that Democrats stole the election
> from President Trump. But no evidence was offered to support the
> #MaidenGate claim in the original tweet. The tweet included no
> details on the maiden name that supposedly had been stolen, so
> there was no way to verify the claim."[78]

We will discuss the specific mechanics of how these types of bottom-up "friend-
of-a-friend" narratives spread further in Chapter 4. We include it here as an
example of the way in which many sub-components of the Stop the Steal narra-
tive were often based on unverifiable claims recast as facts.

The claims based on alleged voter irregularities, however, were at least rooted
in the realm of the plausible. There was another collection of narratives, repur-
posed to explain how the "steal" took place, that were far afield of mainstream
reality, yet were still amplified on national television by some of President
Trump's closest advisors: outlandish election conspiracies in which powerful
dark forces purportedly conspired to steal the election using secret "Deep State"
technologies to change votes.

Outlandish Claims: Attempts to Explain the "Steal"

Conspiracy theories have increased in visibility in online social spaces over the
last five years; prominent among them is the cultlike conspiracy theory known
as QAnon, which alleges that President Donald Trump spent much of his presi-
dency battling a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophile elites. Believers of this
conspiracy are estimated to number in the low millions and many are supporters
of President Trump.[79] In this section, we discuss two specific conspiratorial
narratives that attracted significant attention in the weeks and months following
the election: the first, which we will call "Hammer and Scorecard," began years
prior to the 2020 election. The second, which we will call "Dominion" after the
election technology company that figures prominently in the narrative, rose to
prominence alongside allegations of irregularities in voting machines. However,
it merged with the Hammer and Scorecard theory to create a hybrid conspiracy
that spread throughout pro-Trump social media spaces. After Election Day,

these conspiracies were deployed within the stolen election meta-narrative to "expose" the machinations behind the purported theft.

Hammer and Scorecard

In 2017, little-known conservative blog TheAmericanReport.org published a story claiming that a government supercomputer called "The Hammer" was created in 2009 by the CIA under President Obama.[80] The article claimed that the supercomputer was designed for spying on, and gathering data from, the American public and conservative politicians, including Donald Trump. This machine supposedly included an application called "Scorecard," which was capable of manipulating election systems by switching votes to preferred candidates. The claims underlying the story were made starting in 2013 by Dennis Montgomery, described as a "CIA contractor-turned-whistleblower" who claimed to have built the system. Various election results worldwide, and in the United States, were attributed to the work of Hammer and Scorecard. As the conspiracy re-emerged, updated for the events of 2020, fact-checking organizations and CISA repudiated them; some pointed out Montgomery's "history of deception."[81]

Dominion

Early coverage of Dominion Voting Systems occurred within the general discussion of electoral integrity, though mentions of the company appear to have taken off in earnest after two actual software glitches on Election Day in Georgia counties were tied to Dominion software.[82]

In Morgan County and Spalding County, Georgia, outages in electronic poll books temporarily prevented voters from using voting machines on Election Day, resulting in extended voting hours.[83] While the electronic poll books (the lists of eligible voters in a precinct) were manufactured by Knowink, a subcontractor of Dominion, the usage of Dominion Voting machines in these counties would later lead to accusations of widespread faults in Dominion's software.

The next day, a series of reports emerged alleging voting irregularities in Antrim County, Michigan, again tied to Dominion: as votes were being reported, several thousand votes in the county were incorrectly reported for Joe Biden rather than Donald Trump.[84] This error was quickly noticed and resolved. While it would later be attributed by the Michigan Secretary of State to human error,[85] narratives soon emerged that Dominion's software, which was used to tabulate these results, was responsible for the glitch. Prominent verified influencers on social media began explicitly linking this incident to a broader conspiratorial narrative saying Dominion voting systems were manipulating vote counts all over the country.[86]

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As the Dominion issues were occurring, a since-deleted video grew popular, featuring retired General Tom McInerney claiming the "Scorecard" application had been used by the Obama-Biden campaign in 2012 to steal votes in Florida, and was now being deployed by the Biden-Harris campaign in Florida, Georgia, Texas, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Michigan, Nevada, and Arizona. Other YouTube channels such as SGTreport and CDMedia made similar claims, alleging a conspiracy to use technology to steal votes.[87] The videos spread to Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and Parler, and were republished on alternative video platforms such as Rumble and BitChute. At this point, though, the two narratives were still largely on separate tracks.

On November 6, GOP Chairwoman Ronna McDaniel alleged that there had been fraud large enough to overturn Michigan's election results, citing the Antrim County reporting error and suggesting that 47 other counties in Michigan using the same software may have been affected.[88] Disputing McDaniel's claims, the Michigan Secretary of State released another statement reiterating that the reporting incident was human error that had been caught by the county's processes and quickly resolved, and that no other counties were affected.[89] Concurrently, however, conservative media outlets and influencers began noting that Dominion software was used in 30 states, including all swing states, to imply nationwide malfeasance on behalf of Dominion. Articles in the The Gateway Pundit and Breitbart began connecting the Michigan and Georgia incidents to suggest that the two cases were related.[90] The Breitbart article received upwards of 300,000 interactions on Facebook alone, and was posted by President Trump.[91] Similar claims of widespread flaws were shared by influential right-wing individuals and groups such as The Western Journal and Mike Huckabee, and in Spanish by Mexican author Alfredo Jalife-Rahme.[92]

Intersection of the Narratives

The Dominion narrative merged with the Hammer and Scorecard theory after Trump campaign attorney Sidney Powell went on Fox News with Lou Dobbs on November 6 and spread a now disproven theory claiming that the software glitch that caused erroneous vote counts in Michigan was in fact the deliberate work of the "Hammer and Scorecard" program.[94] Powell, who was later disavowed by the Trump campaign after a series of scathing legal rulings in cases she helped litigate, gained credence in the Trump orbit for her willingness to promote unsubstantiated fraud theories.[95] Powell claimed that the purported CIA technology altered 3% of the vote total in pre-election voting ballots that were collected digitally.

The converging narratives were amplified by conservative website The Gateway Pundit, which quoted Powell at length.[96] Similar claims appeared on Trump-supporting media channels such as OANN. While the Dominion and Hammer

Figure 3.40: Tweets pushing the Dominion conspiracy, including one from President Trump.[93]

and Scorecard narratives initially were amplified together, after November 6 mentions focusing on the Dominion narrative subsumed Hammer and Scorecard (see Figure 3.41 on the following page); mentions of the latter dropped off precipitously, while the former remained significant.

Once the Dominion narrative subsumed the Hammer and Scorecard narrative, Donald Trump and his campaign quickly became the most prolific spreaders. President Trump first tweeted about Dominion on November 12, and tweeted dozens more times in the days following. Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), "REPORT: DOMINION DELETED 2.7 MILLION TRUMP VOTES NATIONWIDE." Rudy Giuliani repeated similar claims on November 11 and the days after.[97]

For weeks after the election, the Dominion narrative persisted and was adapted into ongoing narratives around electoral fraud by a variety of communities. One video (on YouTube, Rumble, and Reddit) purporting to feature a "smoking gun"

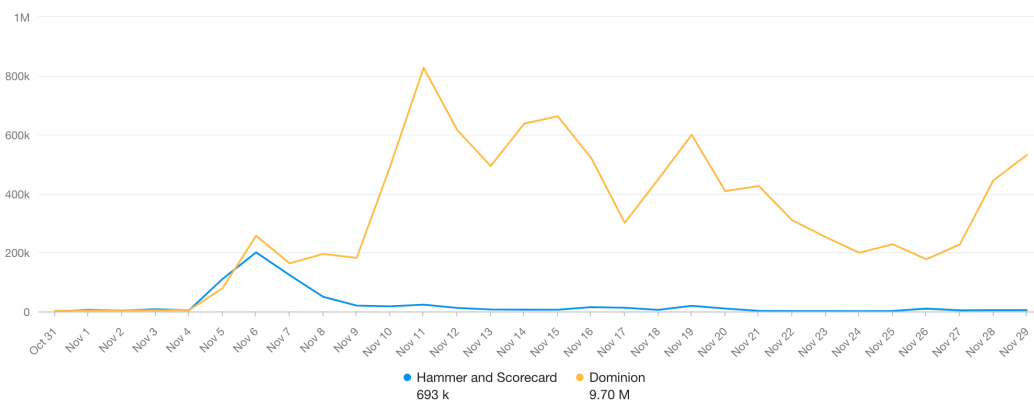## 3. Incidents and Narratives: The Evolution of Election Misinformation

Figure 3.41: Mentions of Hammer and Scorecard (blue) were initially linked to mentions of Dominion (yellow), but were eventually consumed by the Dominion narrative. (Source: Meltwater Social)

regarding Dominion Voting Systems machines in Pennsylvania was widely shared by high-profile accounts in Trump- and QAnon-supporting communities nearly four weeks after the election.[98] Another theory suggests Smartmatic, another technology company, was orchestrating Dominion's supposed interference.[99] Yet another suggests several USB memory cards containing the cryptographic key to access Dominion Voting Systems were stolen in Philadelphia.[100] These theories, which have been amplified using #StolenUSBs and #Mitattack, were published by various outlets, including Russian state media outlet Sputnik International (which credulously reported the claims of 8kun administrator and QAnon aficionado Ron Watkins, calling him a "US cyber-security expert"), and were repeatedly amplified by the President on Twitter.[101]

The claims became increasingly outlandish. Allegations appeared claiming Dominion had ties to individuals frequently scapegoated by conservatives including Bill Gates, George Soros, and even members of the Venezuelan government.[103] Others alleged Dominion had links to China, posting URLs to the US Patents and Trademark Office website featuring a licensing agreement between the company and Chinese bank HSBC.[104] The same day that news broke of Russia-attributed cyberattacks on US government infrastructure using vulnerabilities in SolarWind software, The Gateway Pundit published a piece claiming Dominion used the same software, a claim that was quickly denied by Dominion representatives.[105] Both Dominion and Hammer and Scorecard have also been used as key pieces of evidence for the "Kraken" narrative in which Sidney Powell would "release the Kraken" by dropping indisputable evidence of voter fraud in lawsuits led by the President's legal team, and by the general Stop The Steal movement.[106]

The Dominion-meets-Hammer and Scorecard narrative has been adopted into

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Figure 3.42: A tweet claiming a link between Dominion voting machines and Smartmatic.[102]

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the broader belief systems of various right-wing communities, including the Proud Boys, the far-right militia group Three Percenters, and the Daily Stormer, a Neo-Nazi publication.[107] #Dominion was used in 1 of every 7 tweets from QAnon accounts.[108] QAnon groups used the hashtag #LordMarkMallochBrown to demonstrate supposed ties between Dominion software systems and George Soros. Lord Mark Malloch-Brown is a board member of SGO, the parent company of Smartmatic, and is also on the board of Soros-founded organization Open Society.
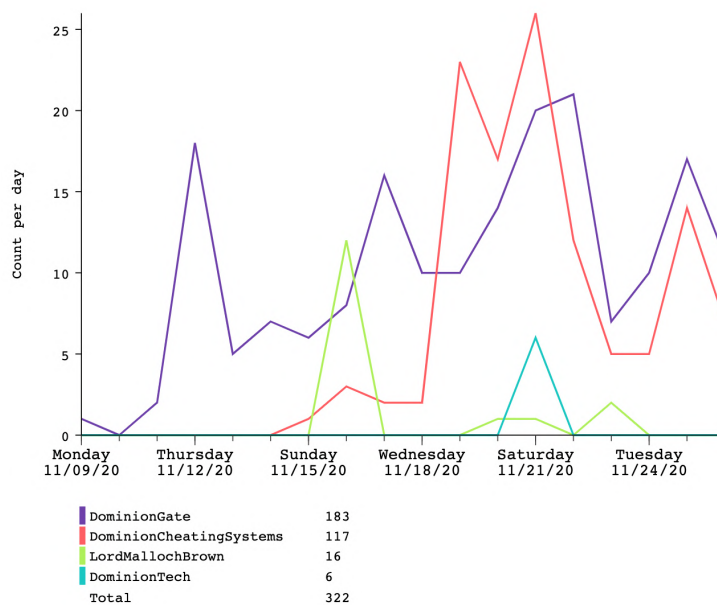

Figure 3.43: Hashtag use on Twitter for hashtags related to Dominion Voting System fraud narratives.

The Dominion and Hammer and Scorecard narratives take on additional significance for their link to ongoing incidents of real-world harm. Since the election, Dominion employees have been doxxed, harassed, and threatened by right-wing influencers and members of the general public.[109] In early December a now-offline website, EnemiesOfThePeople[.]us, was created (later attributed to Iran, and discussed in our report's "Foreign State-Backed Actors" section), featuring personal information about multiple Dominion employees with crosshairs shown over the faces of each targeted individual.[110] Most recently, Dominion has begun to file defamation lawsuits against prominent figures involved in the perpetuation of the conspiracies we have described, including Rudy Giuliani and Sidney Powell.[111] As of the writing of this report, several of the publications that aired the claims, such as American Thinker, have retracted them.[112]

The Hammer and Scorecard and Dominion conspiracies reinforced the Stop The Steal movement, which ultimately led to violence. The hashtag appeared on the banner of one of the first websites to announce the January 6 rally in Washington, DC: "#DONOTCERTIFY #JAN6 #STOPTHESTEAL #WILDPROTEST."[113] And as the violent insurrectionists breached the Capitol on that day, #StopTheSteal signs could be seen across the crowd. In the next section, we trace threats of violence during the 2020 election, leading up to that tragic day.

3.4   Election-Related Violence

The 2020 election season brought with it high tensions, and concerns about violence were prevalent leading up to, during, and after the election. The EIP team monitored channels across the political spectrum to identify and report specific threats of violence. While this violence did not materialize on Election Day, that relative calm was eclipsed by violent riots on January 6 at the US Capitol.

The violence at the Capitol can be traced to violent rhetoric curated and iterated on throughout the pre-election period, on Election Day, and after. Before the election, both speculation and true threats of violence centered on tensions between existing groups. For example, while the left theorized about the next steps of the Proud Boys and similar groups, the right created narratives about "antifa" and Black Lives Matter (BLM) groups organizing massive violent insurrections.

This dynamic shifted distinctly on Election Day, especially among right-wing audiences. Content with specific pieces of alleged "evidence" of electoral fraud was weaponized to support the organization of real-world violence. Additionally, rather than attacking other political groups, the ideology behind consolidated movements such as #StopTheSteal spurred violence specifically toward election officials and vendors, instead of simply toward "traditional" enemies such as the Democrats and associated organizations like BLM. This growing distrust of officials and institutions, regardless of political party affiliation, for their role in the purportedly "stolen" election culminated in an organized, violent insurrection on January 6.

Pre-Election Concerns

Prior to the election, the vast majority of violence-related content online was users predicting unrest on Election Day and calling on other users to not vote in person. This content circulated among both left-leaning and right-leaning users, with users differing on who was considered responsible, and who would be targeted.

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Left-leaning social media users circulated false warnings about far-right groups and militias. One post about concerns that Proud Boys were planning to shoot BLM protesters received over 278,000 likes (see Figure 3.44). Meanwhile, right-leaning accounts also posted concerns that left-leaning groups such as antifa, BLM, and the Sunrise Movement were planning to commit mass violent acts on Election Day or the days following. For example, in September, right-leaning accounts spread concern about an image that called for "Antifa comrades" to dress up as "patriots/Trump supporters" to confuse the police at riots. This image spread to Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, garnering high engagement: on Facebook, there were over 10,000 reactions, 15,000 shares, and 1,000 comments. The image was subsequently fact-checked by Snopes and Medium and found to be an internet joke from 2017 that had a second wave of popularity in 2020. [114]Heading into Election Day, pro-Trump accounts asked their followers how they would respond to violence or voter intimidation from the left. Audience responses indicate that threats of violence and anger were directed at the left and leftist groups specifically.
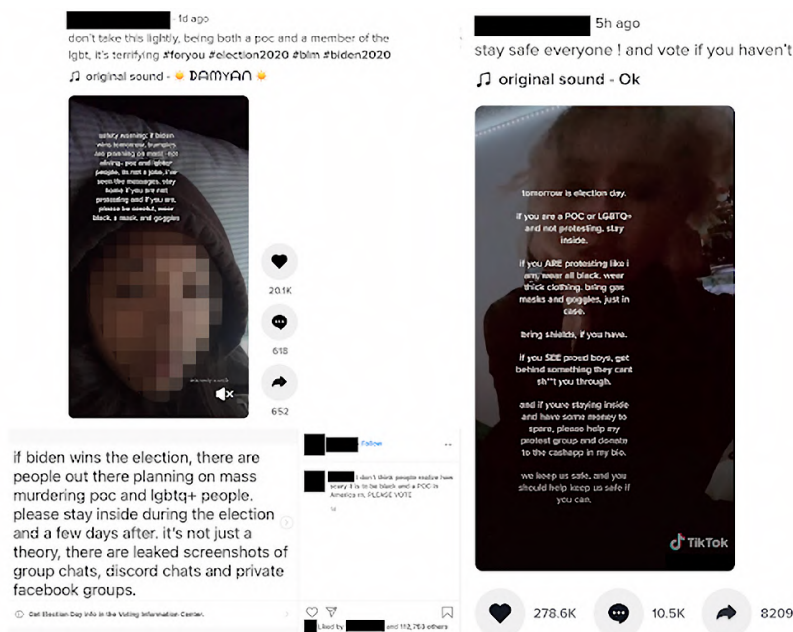

Figure 3.44: Posts showing concerns about violence from left-leaning social media users.

Despite the reach and engagement of posts that raised fears about the potential for violence, the EIP did not uncover any evidence of violent plans, such as from right-wing Discord channels or Facebook Groups. Given the vague nature of the claims and the absence of any specific evidence from those who posted concerns of violence, these posts were non-falsifiable and unsubstantiated. Most of the spreaders of this type of content appeared to be well-intentioned individuals,

including members of purportedly targeted communities who wanted to warn their communities of an impending danger.[115] They encouraged their audiences to engage with and share their content; the resulting "copypasta" reposts of the text and images spread the misinformation further and created viral panic among some online communities.

Figure 3.45: Posts showing concerns about violence from right-leaning social media users.

During and Post-Election

Posts using violent rhetoric or inciting violence after the election significantly differed from pre-election posts as they turned from fearing violence to coordinating and organizing violence. In addition, posts were linked through larger narratives, especially election theft, and threats turned their focus to institutions such as voting systems and the government, instead of partisan groups like antifa or the Proud Boys.

From right-leaning accounts, many violence-related posts became increasingly tied to claims of election theft or rigging and at times were part of increasing rhetoric that more generally referenced the idea of preparation for civil war. Usage of the specific hashtag "#civilwar" on Twitter grew significantly between November 1 and November 5, and posts calling for civil war increased as results that favored Biden were announced. One Twitter user posted "Let's just fast forward to #CivilWar and get it over with and take out the filthy Cancerous #DemocRats and remove them from our society."

In the weeks that followed, the EIP additionally tracked calls for violence against specific individuals and groups. As discussed in the previous section, employees of Dominion Voting Systems received targeted harassment including death threats and doxxing of personal information. Online threats became so common that Dominion Voting employee Eric Coomer went into hiding.[116]

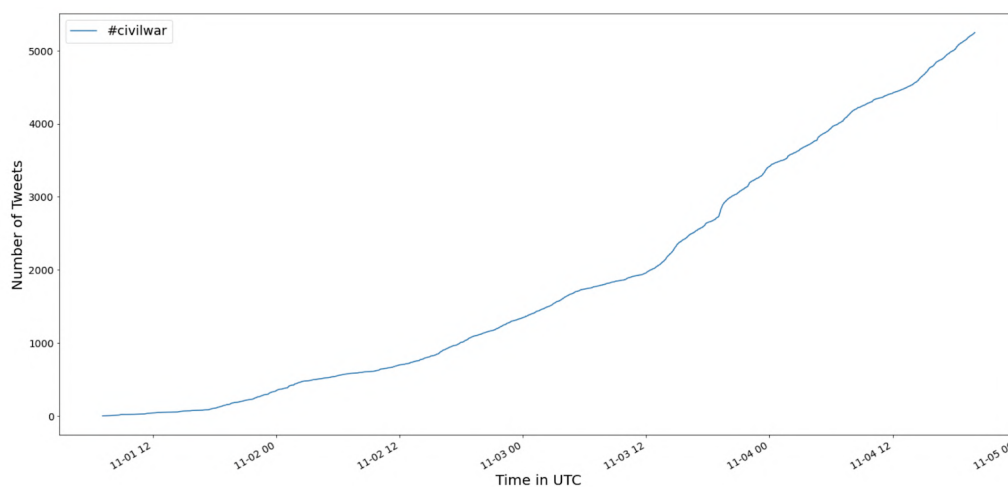3. Incidents and Narratives: The Evolution of Election Misinformation

Figure 3.46: Cumulative instances of the hashtag #civilwar between November 1 and November 5, 2020.

Figure 3.47: A right-leaning Twitter user calls for civil war against Democrats in response to alleged electoral fraud.
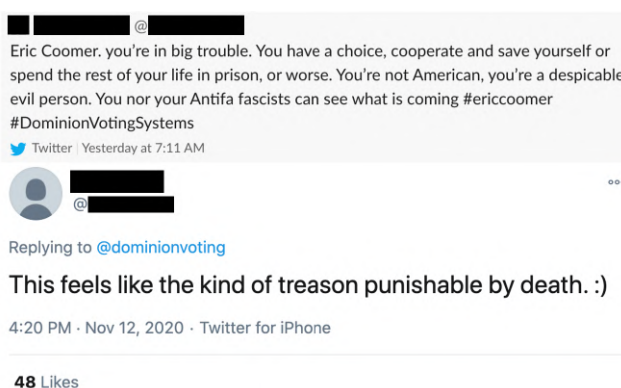

Figure 3.48: Twitter users call for death or violence against Dominion Voting employees.

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Events Surrounding January 6, 2021

On the morning of January 6, 2021, President Trump spoke to his supporters out-side the White House and stated multiple lies about how the election was stolen from him. In his speech, Trump referred to Democrats as having attempted "the most brazen and outrageous election theft," and said, "We will not take it anymore...We will stop the steal." He encouraged his followers to march to the Capitol and "try and give them [Republicans] the kind of pride and boldness that they need to take back our country."[117] A pro-Trump mob then forcibly entered the Capitol building and forced Congress to take cover and evacuate. Five people died as a result of the Capitol breach.[118]

The violent insurrection against the United States Capitol on January 6 demon-strated the real-world impact of mis- and disinformation narratives such as Stop the Steal, and the effect that social media echo chambers can have on organized violence. While earlier concerns about violence did not materialize, angry rhetoric was frequent. That anger made its way to the offline world, as so-cial media users used platforms to coordinate, recruit, and organize real-world violence. Far-right users used "alt" social media sites, like Gab and Parler, to openly organize and recruit others to join them, give directions on what streets to avoid, and post about bringing weapons into the Capitol.[119]

As the violent mob launched an insurrection against the US Capitol on January 6, angry comments by pro-Trump protestors filmed in the building, signs carried by those outside, and calls for violence against elected officials certifying the vote referenced narratives that we have discussed in this chapter.

In response to mainstream platforms continuing to crack down in the aftermath of that violence, users moved off of Facebook and Twitter and onto smaller sites with less regulation, such as Parler, Gab, and Telegram. To what extent these communities will continue to operate in closed social media networks—the same networks that consistently proliferated the notion that the election was stolen from President Trump—remains to be seen.[120] Regardless, the attack on the US Capitol will forever stand as testament to the violence that echo chambers, online rhetoric, and sustained misinformation can unleash on the world.

3.5   Narrative Crossover and Fabrication in Non-English Media

To this point, we have traced English-language incidents, narratives, and con-spiracies that shaped the 2020 election. However, although the majority of the EIP tickets collected and analyzed election-related misinformation taking place in English-speaking communities, there are many American communities that participate in political conversations in languages other than English, and on

apps and chat platforms popular with diaspora communities. In this section we briefly discuss examples of election-related mis- and disinformation in Chinese- and Spanish-speaking communities. In both cases, EIP analysts found that a majority of the observed content were translations of the same narratives that appeared in English—including those featured in prior sections of this chapter. However, there were also uniquely inflected narratives, outlets, and actors targeting these distinct communities.

Chinese-Language Misinformation

EIP analysts identified three types of Chinese-language misinformation: (1) misinformation translated directly from English-language media, (2) misinformation that originates from English-language media but is substantially altered during the adaptation to Chinese-language audiences, and (3) misinformation that originates from Chinese-language media and users.

Additionally, the EIP identified two actors that were prominent in spreading mis- and disinformation in the Chinese-language media sphere, with more complex motives and sophisticated distribution apparatuses: Falun Gong (法輪功), which owns and operates the Epoch Times, and Guo Wengui (also known as Miles Guo) and his associated media enterprises, including Himalaya Global and the GTV/GNews media group.

The more influential of the two is Falun Gong, an exiled, virulently anti-CCP Chinese religious movement.[121] Its media empire consists of the Shen Yun dance troupe, US and overseas newspapers including the Epoch Times, television networks such as New Tang Dynasty TV, and the Sound of Hope Radio Network; the entire media complex has more than 12 million followers. The group's ideological commitments are fluid, save for a long-standing adversarial relationship with the CCP government, but in recent years have trended in a right-wing direction. Beginning in 2016, Falun Gong also grew more assertive in domestic politics in the US, embracing Trump administration rhetoric while pairing its habitual denunciations of the CCP with accusations that Democrats were colluding with them.[122] In 2020 it published extensively on Hunter Biden's alleged ties to the Chinese government.[123]

The other two entities—Himalaya Global and the GTV/GNews media group—maintain close connections to exiled billionaire real estate developer-turned-media tycoon Guo Wengui. Both have forged close connections with domestic US politics and politicians, and in particular former White House chief strategist Steve Bannon. Himalaya Global rarely produces information on its own. Instead, its primary focus is on translating information from English-speaking conservative news sources, including Fox News and Steve Bannon's War Room. It also features a channel of Guo's criticism of the CCP, which is a mixture of

purported whistle-blower statements and conspiracy theories, and reiteration of his support of Donald Trump.[124] The GTV/Gnews media group, by contrast, was founded directly by Guo Wengui, with the goal of "taking down the CCP."[125] GTV/Gnews also reposted many of Bannon's War Room podcasts. During the 2020 election in the US, these two media entities actively reposted mis- and disinformation on both electoral processes and unverified stories about the Democratic candidate and his family, particularly on conservative alt-platform Parler. CCP state-backed media's contribution to mis- and disinformation is discussed in the box on 119.

Narratives Originating from English-Speaking Sources

Most of the election misinformation that gained widespread reach in the Chinese-American community stemmed from English conservative media sources, and content closely resembled that source material. Before the election, popular narratives from English-speaking media that made their way into Chinese-speaking online communities included accusations of Democrats manipulating the election, conspiracies surrounding mail-in-ballots, and theories about the Deep State.[126]

Typically, Chinese-language content was published soon after its English version. On November 6, 2020, James O'Keefe of Project Veritas tweeted a video of USPS workers alleging that the USPS Postmaster in Pennsylvania ordered workers to fraudulently backdate ballots.[127] One day later, the Epoch Times published a Chinese-language article titled "Penn postal worker allegations: postmaster falsifies ballot dates."[128] The article summarized the videos posted by James O'Keefe without providing any new information. Similarly, the English-language right-wing news site Distributed News published a story on the "Scorecard" conspiracy described above. Soon after, the story was picked up and word-for-word republished by Sound of Hope, another media outlet owned and operated by Falun Gong and with a large online following.[129]

Occasionally, Chinese-language users altered the message en route to a new audience. For example, in late October, English-language Twitter user @ThePubliusUSA posted a video purporting to be shot in a mailroom in Florida's Biden-leaning Miami-Dade County, depicting mounds of undelivered ballots alongside speculation that USPS failures were harming Biden's chances in the county.[130] The video went viral on Twitter before eventually spreading to Weibo, a Beijing-based Chinese-language social media platform, where a US-based Weibo user, Xiyatu Zhixia 西雅图夏至 (Seattle Summer Time), translated the description and shared it with her 119,180 followers. Notably, her interpretation was more circumspect than the original video's: "If this story proves true, if these are ballots, if the same situation is occurring at other post offices, the consequences will be serious.[131]"

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Figure 3.49: Top, English–language speakers post a video purported to be filmed in a Miami mailroom; bottom, a Weibo user reposts the video, speculating that it might hurt the Democratic Party.

104

Narratives Unique to Chinese-Speaking Communities

Chinese-language media did originate its own misinformation, although less frequently. These narratives often added an angle alleging a covert relationship between the Democratic candidate (or Party) and the CCP, therefore accusing both the CCP government and the Democratic Party of corrupting the US election.

For example, a Facebook post from November 6, 2020, by Chen Junjun 陳君君 (Gentleman Chen), captioned as "South Park told the truth eight years ago; the CCP is behind the Democrat's mail-in-ballots voter fraud," featured a 2012 clip from South Park joking that Obama colluded with the Chinese to win the election.[132] The video's final frames claimed "Joe Biden is stealing the election" before exhorting viewers to "Support Trump fight back." A "Himalayan global" icon in the final frame suggests the user may have lifted the video from Miles Guo's media network.

Figure 3.50: A Twitter post accusing China of sending mail-in ballots to the US.[133]

Very occasionally, Chinese-originated misinformation made new claims about

the US election without a CCP link. On November 6, Epoch Times posted an article in which Gary Yang, a member of the Michigan Chinese Conservatives Alliance and a poll watcher at the TCF Center in Detroit, claimed that while he and another Republican observed that an estimated 7,000 to 10,000 ballots were counted on election night, ballot counters reported 50,000. He also claimed the staff were deliberately slowing down the counting process.[134] Although fact-checking information has not been offered to debunk this specific piece, there has been no convincing evidence of large-scale voter fraud in Michigan.

Spanish-Language Misinformation

Narratives Originating from English-Speaking Sources

Similarly to Chinese-language community misinformation, many of the misinformation narratives in the Spanish-language community did not originate from within the community. Most were translated from English and circulated via prominent platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, as well as in closed group chat platforms like WhatsApp, and efforts often appeared coordinated across platforms.[135] Also similarly to Chinese misinformation dynamics, the most prominent narratives and those shared were either closely aligned with or completely repurposed from right-wing media outlets. Both grassroots users initiating bottom-up narratives and verified or large-audience influencers had key roles to play in the Spanish-language misinformation ecosystem.

Non-verified, grassroots users were an important source of the Spanish-language misinformation compilations surfaced by the EIP. Q-adherent users organically "bootstrapped" off English-language theories to present conspiratorial threads as intricate as those of their English counterparts. In a single thread, one such user linked together several false narratives: James O'Keefe's Michigan USPS whistleblower story and the Hammer software narrative, both discussed above, and a generic QAnon rallying cry.[136] Twitter placed a label on the original tweet for the Hammer software claim within this longer thread; however, the label on this tweet does not automatically translate to Spanish, even if that is set as the default account language. This follows a broader trend observed throughout the election season, in which non-English language policy enforcement fell distinctly behind even when the narratives themselves were the same across languages.[137]

The Spanish-language mis- and disinformation sphere also boasted several large-scale influencers who paralleled English-language repeat spreaders in disseminating the top narratives to large audiences. One example is Aliesky Rodriguez, a Cuban-American Trump supporter living in Florida, who hosts a livestreamed talk show that has peddled almost every one of the aforementioned narratives to his nearly 100,000 subscribers. Rodriguez's videos often received between
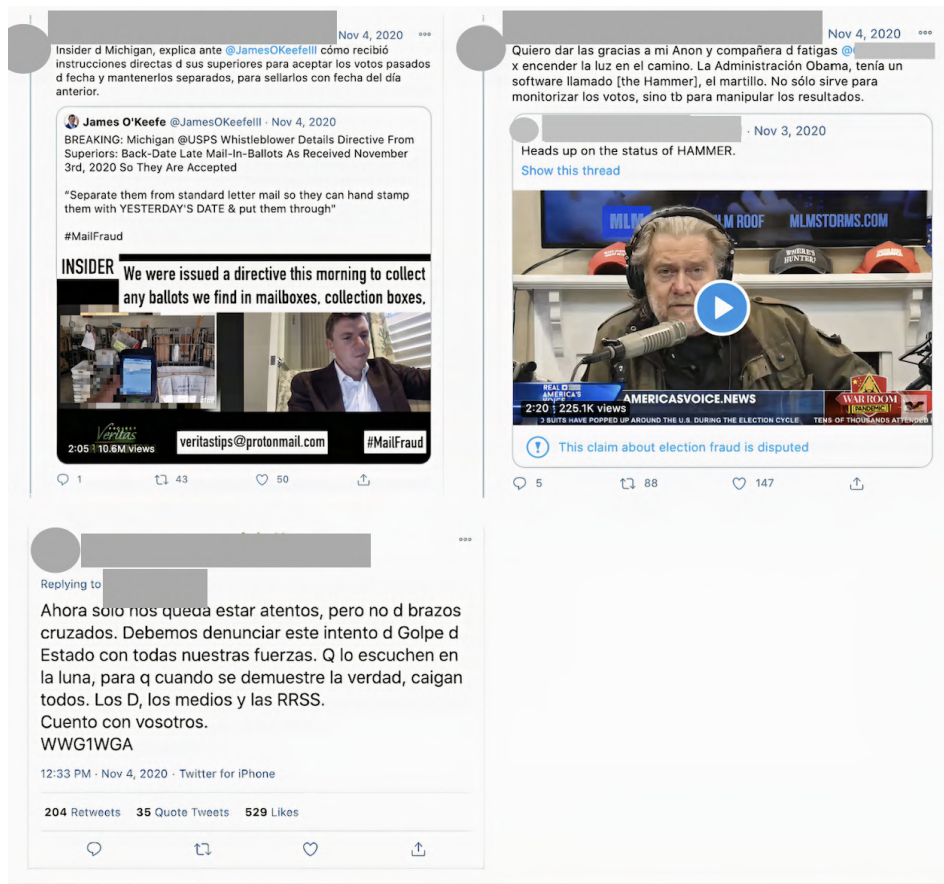
Figure 3.51: A QAnon-adherent Twitter user, now suspended, was extremely active during the election period, collating several English-language misinformation threads into long-form "educational" posts.

50,000 and 110,000 views. For comparison, prominent Spanish-language outlet Univision Noticias, with more than five million subscribers, often receives between 5,000 and 30,000 views per video.

Rodriguez's channel often involves screen sharing and live-translating English-language content while editorializing. On November 5, Rodriguez was joined by co-host Amelia Doval for a "live demo" of the dead voter narrative, one of the theories peddled by English-language repeat spreaders directly after the elections (see Figure 3.52 on the following page). Rodriguez and Doval exaggerated the impact of dead people voting to their Spanish-speaking audience. In subsequent shows, they covered topics such as Sydney Powell's "release the Kraken" statements (described in the Dominion section above), the Supreme Court rulings on contested election results, and the lead-up to the January 6 insurrection.

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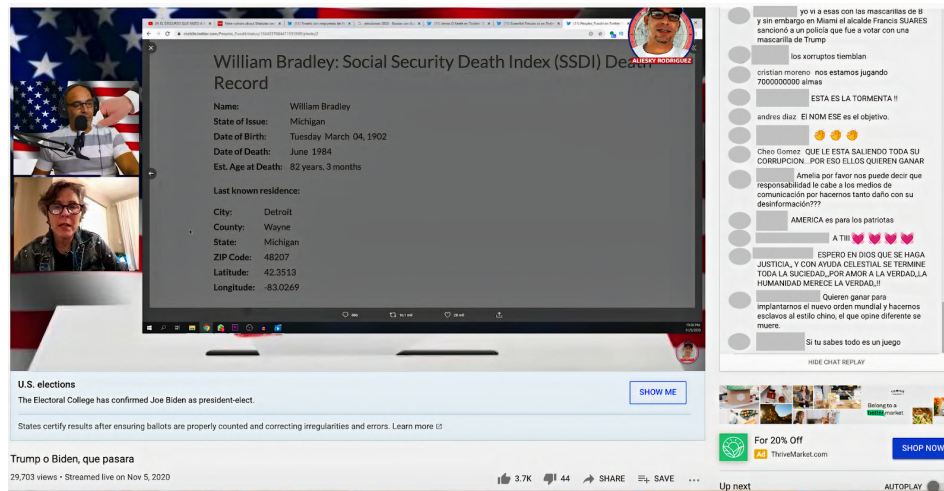
Figure 3.52: Aliesky Rodriguez and Amelia Doval push the dead voters narrative. Rodriguez's audience often comments on the "deep seeded corruption," uses proud statements that "AMERICA is for the patriots," or pivots into religious supplications for "CELESTIAL AID."
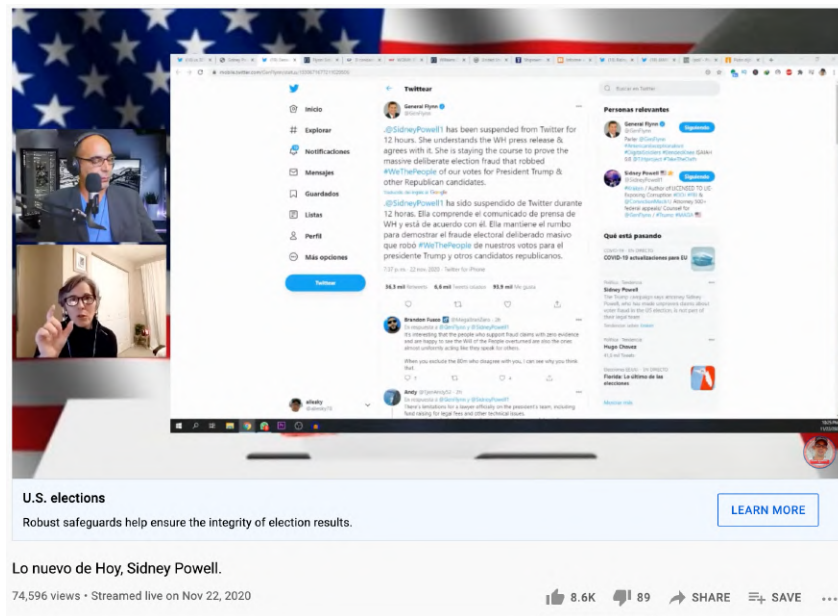
Figure 3.53: During a November 22 livestream, Rodriguez answered live viewer questions on the role of Sidney Powell in "dismantling the electoral fraud" against Donald Trump. A key facet of Rodriguez's videos is screen sharing and breaking down English-language tweets for his Spanish-language audience.

These efforts often appeared to be coordinated across channels. For example, a November 6 video by Rodriguez migrated within moments from his channel to Mr. Capacho Tv's channel, one of the most popular sources for Spanish conspiracy theories.
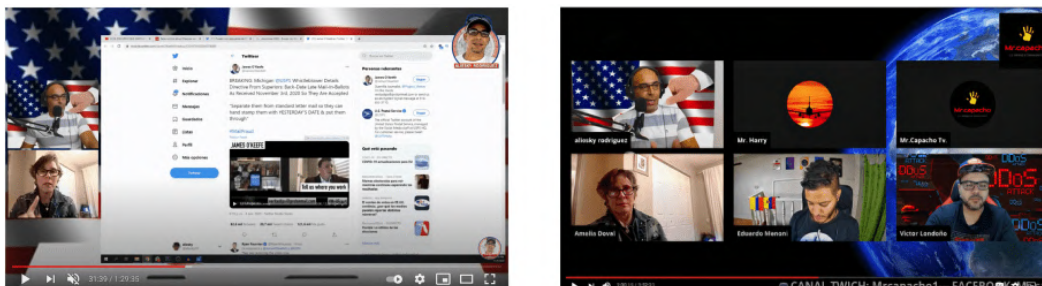
Figure 3.54: Aliesky Rodriguez's November 6, 2020, video on his YouTube channel appeared moments later on Mr. Capacho's channel.

Rodriguez's channel was neither the only example nor necessarily the most prominent in the entire Spanish-language misinformation landscape. However, this example illustrates the larger strategy used by many of his peers in serving English-originating misinformation narratives to a Spanish-speaking audience.

Narratives Unique to Spanish-Speaking Sources

Several outlets have reported on the different politically motivated disinformation narratives and QAnon conspiracy theories that spread within the Spanish-language communities leading into the election.[138] The most prominent such narrative connected Biden to socialism, which may have been intended to discourage Latino voters who fled the socialist regimes in Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua from voting Democratic. However, since this content was not related to the election processes themselves, it was deemed out of scope of our overall EIP investigations.

Non-English Language Misinformation Impact

In both the Spanish- and Chinese-language communities the EIP monitored, the content that got the most engagement were those that translated claims of fraud and delegitimization from English into the audience's native language. While some original content was certainly present in each community, these narratives were secondary to those based on the "evidence" gathered from prominent English-language influencers and viral posts. Thus, although it is not a comprehensive solution, slowing the spread of English-language misinformation could still have a significant downstream impact on its virality in non-English language

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communities. Platforms can be more proactive at detecting this translation pipeline, and subsequently labeling this content in the appropriate language.

Culturally significant messages were sometimes added to the misinformation, complicating the fact-checking process. For Spanish-language users, this content usually took the form of religious commentary denouncing socialism and the left, which appeals to Latino audience members who come from religious, often Catholic, backgrounds and/or who fled a socialist regime in their birth country. For Chinese-language users, this took the form of alleged collusion with the Chinese government or the Communist Party. Effective fact-checks were notably lacking for both of these communities: improvements to this process should not merely translate the fact-checking content into the correct language, but also take these cultural aspects into account.

> ### Foreign State-Backed Actors in the 2020 Election
>
> It's difficult to rigorously compare foreign interference campaigns in the 2016 and 2020 US election cycles, given the enormous differences in awareness and preparedness between both electoral cycles.
>
> In 2016, information operations on social media were a true blind spot for entities charged with protecting the integrity of the election, from Silicon Valley to Washington. The full scope of the Russian campaigns targeting the 2016 election only came to light in 2017-2018. By November 2020, a professional field had emerged that focused on ensuring these operations would be detected and exposed faster. Between December 2019 and Election Day, 12 foreign information operations focused on the US 2020 elections were detected, attributed, and exposed by platforms, government entities, and researchers. It is worth noting that this section only covers the operations that the Partnership investigated during the height of the electoral period, excluding the handful of foreign information operations targeting the US 2020 election that had been detected and deactivated months prior to the height of the electoral season.
>
> A range of foreign actors were assessed to have a vested interest in the outcome of the elections, both in terms of the actual result and its reception by the American public. The Election Integrity Partnership prioritized monitoring actors based in China, Iran, and Russia during the election period. Using a combination of investigative methods and ongoing monitoring, the Partnership was able to track the covert and overt efforts made by foreign actors to influence the US 2020 election.
>
> On the covert side, this notably involved monitoring new or continued activity from networks that have been previously attributed to Russia,

China, and Iran and were involved in targeting Americans via grey propaganda and social media engagement. In terms of covert operations, actors originating in these three countries appeared to take different approaches to the 2020 US elections. Assets linked to the former Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) consistently amplified narratives about electoral fraud throughout the election and post-election period, primarily through their presence on alternative tech platforms like Parler and Gab.

On the overt side, a number of different approaches were taken. Live network maps provided by Graphika revealed that official state outlets affiliated with Russia, Iran, and China were publishing and commenting on the subject of the US elections throughout the campaign period. Russian state media and the social media presences of state officials and institutions were heavily engaged with the topic of the US elections. However, Chinese and Iranian state outlets were less consistent in their coverage. Both states adhered to the line that the elections were unimportant for their countries and would not affect their perspective on the relationship between themselves and the US. Instead, China and Iran concentrated on portraying the US as a lawless, "failed state."

Covert Operations

A variety of operations from state actors and organizations indicated that there were adversaries interested in targeting the 2020 election. There were disparate and somewhat unsuccessful attempts to lay the groundwork for information operations during the 2020 election cycle using techniques like faux news rooms, false personas, AI-generated faces, and manipulation of unwitting freelancers for reporting.

Russia

Russian efforts to target the US 2020 election can be traced back to earlier operations exposed in late 2019.[139] This section will focus on a small set of campaigns active around and throughout the height of the electoral season rather than provide a comprehensive survey of foreign information operations having targeted the US 2020 election.

On September 1, 2020, Facebook and Twitter announced that they had received investigative tips from the FBI regarding an IRA-linked website, "PeaceData," which recruited US-based freelancers to populate articles for a faux newsroom espousing left-wing political perspectives. Several platforms removed accounts associated with the operation.[140]

In early October 2020, Graphika first reported on a set of Pages, profiles,

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and a website known as NAEBC, which is attributed to individuals associ-ated with past IRA activity. This particular effort revolved around a fake far-right "newsroom" website, NAEBC, which stands for the "Newsroom for American and European Based Citizens."[141] This operation appeared to be the right-wing counterpart to the previously discussed "PeaceData" endeavor. This front media site had associated accounts operating on Parler and Gab, which functioned as an amplification network posing as conservative individuals who repeatedly shared its articles. Some of these personas authored content on the website. However, after the operation was exposed, the network stopped writing its own articles and instead focused on sharing content written by genuine, recruited right-wing indi-viduals as well as content copied from known far-right websites. By the time of the US election, NAEBC-related assets had been removed from Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn. However, the amplifier accounts on Parler, Gab, and alternative platforms remained active throughout the duration of the election, and engaged in discussing the upcoming vote.

NAEBC contributed to many of the narratives discussed in this paper. During election week, articles posted on the operation's website included a report on "massive voter fraud in Wisconsin," coverage of Republican poll watchers being "blocked" in Philadelphia, and an article that portrayed Trump as a sacrificial demigod. These assets also shared a number of articles and commentary on civil unrest, including an editorial (copied from a US blog) that claimed, "Our dirty, dangerous, and diseased cities are now being destroyed by dirty, dangerous, and diseased animals." After the election, the NAEBC accounts focused on Dominion voting software, particularly by claiming the company is tied to antifa. Despite building up their Parler and Gab presence in an attempt to generate interaction with memes and photomontages, and increasing their rate of posting throughout the electoral cycle, Russia-linked covert accounts did not achieve any significant traction with the targeted communities.

China

Similarly to Russia, networks of political spam accounts pertaining to a China-linked coordinated influence operation attempted to engage with American communities during the 2020 election—and were similarly unsuccessful. The Spamouflage network, which emerged as a Mandarin-language cluster of accounts that debuted English content in the summer of 2020, avoided mentioning the election directly, instead continuing to propagate content that portrays the US in a negative light.[142]

The prolific Spamouflage network, which includes a large number of assets

with shallow or non-existent personas reposting and recycling a large volume of content, has been hit by a series of rolling takedowns since its exposure on YouTube (its primary platform), Facebook, and Twitter, forcing it to stand up dozens of new accounts each time. This cycle of suspensions led to a surge in Spamouflage videos being posted on new channels in September and October 2020, with up to 15 videos emerging per day, some of them shared by previous assets; they have not achieved any significant engagement.

On November 6, after the election had been called, a Spamouflage video referenced election-related protests in New York the previous day, without mentioning the vote. From November 10 onwards, Spamouflage videos commented on the election outcome as a further sign of the "impending collapse of America." Some videos were particularly hostile toward Trump, but most were bipartisan in tone and focused on criticizing the entire structure of US politics. Throughout the election period, Spamouflage English-language videos contrasted the US response to COVID-19 with China's response.

In addition to Spamouflage campaigns, Facebook unveiled a separate network of China-based inauthentic assets, which contained a very small number of assets supporting President Donald Trump or Joe Biden and a short-lived Group supporting former presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg. None of these had much traction by the time the platform took enforcement action.[143]

In spite of this core difference in approach, Russian and Chinese covert operations both focused on the notion that the US is a "lawless state" facing an "inevitable civil war." This theme was also noted by the EIP in its monitoring of the narratives circulated by official state outlets, and raises concerns about how covert operations from foreign actors can leverage the rallying calls of domestic extremist movements—in this case, accelerationism.

Iran

Iran similarly has a track record of information operations targeting US communities.[144] Note, for instance, a handful of websites and affiliated accounts referring to themselves as the "IUVM network" (standing for "International Union of Virtual Media"), which has created persistent information operations and triggered multiple waves of enforcement across platforms. In October, these Iranian operations saw a significant part of the domain names used to spread disinformation seized by the US Department of Justice.[145] However, other Iran-linked campaigns persist: less

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than a month before the US election, the Stanford Internet Observatory documented and analyzed a Twitter campaign attributed to Iranian actors in which actors compromised authentic accounts and created fake ones to disseminate content supporting Black Lives Matter.[146]

On October 19 and 20, 2020, voters in multiple states including Alaska and Florida received emails purporting to be from the far-right group the Proud Boys, instructing them to vote for Donald Trump or face retaliation. Some of the emails included personal details of the voters in question. These emails appeared to come from "info@officialproudboys[.]com," though it was later determined that this address had been spoofed and the emails had been sent from servers in Estonia, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. In some versions of the email, a video link was also included; this video purported to show someone accessing voter information and claiming to demonstrate a method of casting fake ballots.[147] The EIP obtained several of these emails, including from our partners at the NAACP.[148]
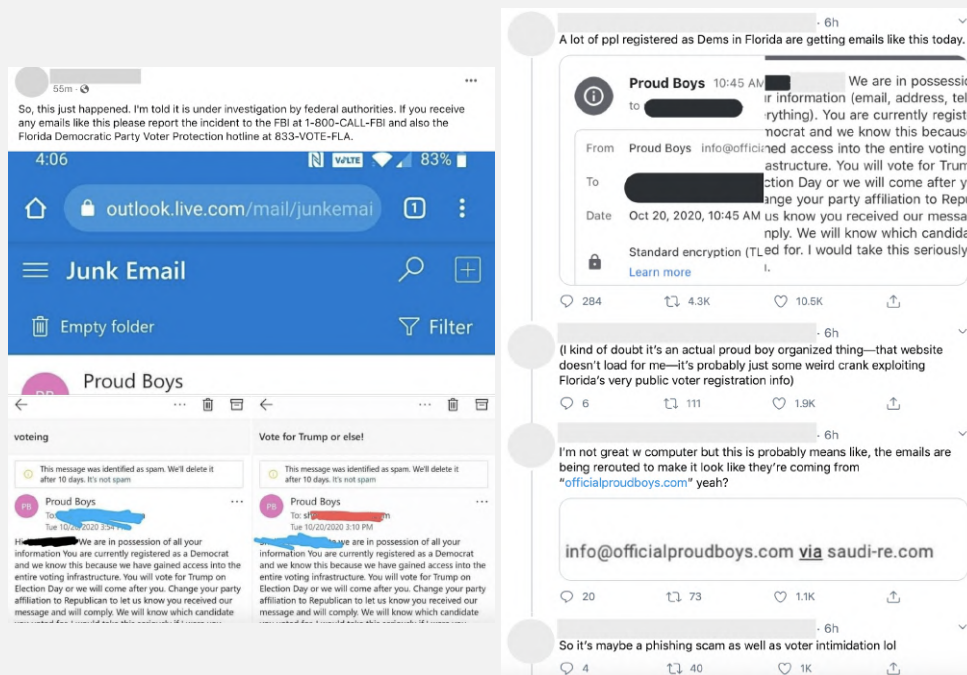

Texts sharing screenshots of emails purporting to be from the Proud Boys.

In a remarkably fast public attribution process, on October 22 the Department of Justice held a press conference attributing this activity to

Iran, though few details were provided.[149] During the conference, it was stated that both Russia and Iran had accessed US voter data; however, the information contained in the "Proud Boys" emails appeared to have been gathered from states that have publicly available voter registration information, meaning this campaign could have been carried out without needing to acquire any private data. The DOJ did not provide any additional evidence to support this attribution.

A series of websites created in early December showed an "Enemies of the People" list, showing the personal information of a number of elected officials and government employees who were countering claims of voter fraud in the 2020 election; the site also listed employees of election software manufacturer Dominion, reflecting the allegations promoted by the Trump legal team and right-wing media. This effort saw the operators including platforms such as Parler and Gab in their social media campaign. This activity was attributed to Iran by the FBI, as reported in the *Washington Post* on December 22.[150]
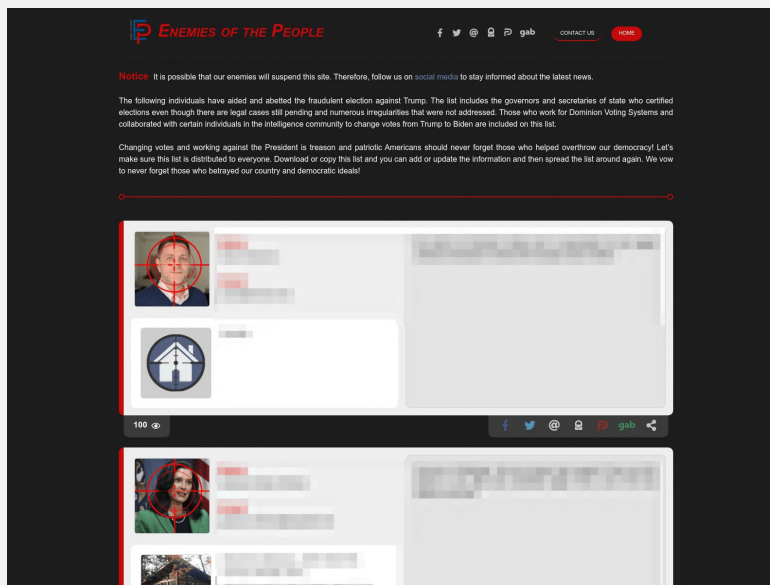
Doxxing on the Enemies of the People website.

Overt/Openly Affiliated State Outlets

While covert information operations were scarce, state media propaganda activities continued to varying degrees. Russian state outlets, including Kremlin-affiliated media entities, diplomats, and other state representa-

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tives, were actively engaged in amplifying some of the most divisive stories described previously in this chapter, focusing predominantly on promoting Donald Trump and casting doubt on the integrity of the electoral system. China was relatively quiet for much of this period. Iran, similarly to China, did not spend much time on the election itself; it focused on portraying the US as a declining power with an electoral outcome of little consequence. 2.1 Russia Throughout the election period, Russian state-affiliated outlets (including state representatives) engaged heavily on the topic of voter fraud.[151] In the lead-up to the election, there was a focus on the issue of mail-in ballots and amplifying allegations of interference from USPS workers, alongside accusations of Big Tech "interference" and "censorship." As the election approached, a number of the principal Kremlin-affiliated media outlets amplified domestic disinformation narratives about Joe Biden and his family. For example, in the month prior to the vote (October 3–November 3), RT (formerly Russia Today) published 52 articles and pieces of video content about Hunter Biden or the Biden family more broadly. This tranche of content includes op-eds with headlines like "Blaming Russia for Hunter's problems was a big misstep, Joe, and it may prove to be your downfall." Notably, many of the more aggressive articles published during this period were opinion pieces posted on the RT and Sputnik websites rather than directly authored by the outlets.

The EIP, among others (including the Department of Homeland Security), also documented the concerted effort by Russian state outlets to amplify disinformation about mail-in voting in the run-up to the election.[152] The Partnership processed over 35 tickets related to Russian outlets spreading election disinformation over the course of the monitoring period. There was one incident in which accusations of Russian activity required de-escalation. This incident culminated with the announcement made by National Intelligence Director John Ratcliffe on October 22 in which, alongside attributing the spoofed Proud Boys emails to Iran, he claimed that Russia had also obtained voter information that could be used to endanger the election.[153] Previous claims on social media, particularly on Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit, had alleged that registration data for 15 million voters in Florida had been hacked and posted on a Russian forum. However, the data of concern appeared to be standard public information made available by the State of Florida and not discernable evidence of a hack.[154] Ratcliffe's announcement appears to have referenced a different incident where private voter information was obtained.

Following election day, the focus of Russian state outlets appeared to shift to delegitimizing the results and alleging fraud on behalf of the Democrats

on a broader, more systemic level. English-speaking followers of these outlets doubled down on the false Dominion narrative, "whistleblower" accounts from poll workers in swing states, and claims that the outcome had been pre-determined by a group of "shadowy elites." A number of these narratives continued well into the post-election period. Additionally, Russian state media spread claims of civil unrest and violent protests. On Twitter and Facebook, Sputnik claimed that a Black Lives Matter-allied group threatened violence if Trump did not concede, and RT posted a documentary-style video pushing a "civil war" narrative. Russian state media also leveraged livestreamed video of protests and in-the-street actions from its entity Ruptly, which it aired on RT as well as lesser-known entities such as Redfish and In The Now.

Left, a tweet by Russian state-backed media property Sputnik claiming Black Lives Matter groups had threatened violence; right, an RT tweet of a video predicting civil war in America.

China

Chinese state media and official accounts appeared to be taking a relatively direct stance toward the topic of the US elections in the months prior to the vote, but as Election Day drew closer, Chinese state officials and media agencies grew quiet. After NCSC Director William Evanina's statement alleging electoral interference by China, Russia, and Iran (in that order),[155] election-related activity from state media and CCP spokespeople declined

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significantly. Reporters at state-backed outlets have said that they were told to ensure coverage was "calm" and "neutral," and were advised not to focus on the election.[156]

In one interview, Fu Cong, Director-General of Arms Control of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stated "Well, we know that the US general election is coming very soon. And I don't want to make any comments that may be interpreted by the US as interfering in their internal affairs or in their general election."[157] Following this guidance, the limited coverage that did exist was even in tone, with the exception of some editorials in state outlets that argued the election would make little difference to US-China relations, given what they described as bipartisan hostility toward China.

After the election, state representatives followed Xi Jinping's lead and did not acknowledge the results until three weeks after the vote. State media covered the election results with a cautiously optimistic tone, but continued disparaging the US overall. In terms of reception, Chinese citizens tended to celebrate Joe Biden and mock Donald Trump, while Chinese Americans typically had mixed responses that leaned pro-Biden.

Notably, both Chinese state media and CCP representatives were willing to forcefully criticize the Trump administration, particularly Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, but they rarely attacked Trump himself and did not express any explicit candidate preference. Even during the week of the election, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying harshly criticized the US while avoiding the election itself.[158] Throughout the election period, Hua appeared to shape the narratives and tone that CCP representatives then echoed. While she has significantly fewer followers than state media outlets, she is consistently the most-mentioned account among followers of Chinese outlets and CCP representatives.

Iran

Iranian state-backed outlets frequently used coverage of the US to diminish the country and cast Iran in a favorable light, but rarely engaged in what can be classified as the widespread propagation of disinformation. On occasion, Iranian outlets did publish content designed to attack the legitimacy of the American electoral process—saying it fell short of its democratic ideals and was likely to be marred by violence. This at times involved questioning American democracy altogether—in some cases using the voice of American academics, "analysts," activists, or media outlets to do so.

During election week, Iranian officials sought to undermine the efficacy of the US system of government, with Ayatollah Ali Khamenei releasing a

> speech in which he described the election as a "spectacle" showing the "ugly face of liberal democracy in the US" where the only certain outcome is "the political, civil, & moral decline of the US regime," and furthered the narrative that the US was facing an existential crisis.[159] Broader Iranian coverage focused on domestic issues like racial disparities and social divisions, the treatment of protesters and minorities by the police, and growing fears of civil unrest within the US.
>
> In a similar vein, Tehran-based Mehr News Agency used an October report from the Department of Homeland Security warning about foreign election interference to suggest that such warnings were "old ways" of "creating panic" among the American public and were designed to induce participation in the electoral process—and presumably to lend the election a stronger legitimacy.[160] In at least one instance, Iranian outlets used a report from The Hill about concerns over the absentee voting system in Texas to heighten fears of voter suppression in the US.[161]
>
> Through quotes from official and op-ed pieces, Mehr, Fars, Tasnim, and other Iranian state-backed outlets frequently promoted the notion that Trump and Biden were roughly equivalent in terms of their antagonism toward the interests of the Regime and the Iranian people, and so the outcome of the election was largely irrelevant to Iranian interests. However, at times these outlets showed a slight preference for a Biden administration if only because of President Trump's open hostility toward the country. This narrative stayed fairly consistent even in the days following the election, with only minor adjustments.

3.6 Fact-Checking Claims and Narratives

In some cases, the direction and life cycle of a narrative can be diverted, or even stopped, by way of authoritative fact-checking. As narratives containing misinformation and conspiracy theories about the election emerged and spread on social media, fact-checking by news sites, professional organizations, and election officials often followed—but their efforts were not uniformly received. Some high-profile narratives were fact-checked and easily debunked by journalists, government officials, and mainstream media, including EIP partners. Other false narratives escaped the notice of the fact-checking community for weeks, or were never fact-checked at all.

In the following section, we examine examples of the fact-checking response to two of our prominent misinformation case studies from earlier in the chapter: Sharpiegate and Dominion Voting Systems.

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Case Study 1: Fact-Checking Sharpiegate

As the Sharpiegate narrative grew on Election Day and the days immediately following, government offices and news media began to fact-check the claims. This was particularly true in Arizona. On November 3, 2020, at 12:09 pm PT, before polls had even closed, the Maricopa County Elections Department posted a video that debunked these claims to their Facebook account.[162] Many commenters remained unconvinced: some of the most popular comments on the video claimed that their ballots were canceled, and attributed this to using a Sharpie. Despite this initial attempt at debunking, posts on social platforms continued to propagate the misinformation narrative of election fraud based on the breadth of Sharpie use and the "massive bleed through" they cause.

The next morning, November 4 at 8:50 am PT, Pima County released a tweet thread citing the Arizona Election Manual, clarifying that all ballots would be counted regardless of the type of writing implement used.[163] Again, many of the commenters who replied were skeptical at best: comments mostly questioned why officials would allow the usage of felt-tip or Sharpie markers if there was the chance of bleeding through the ballot. Other comments pushed back on the officials' claims, asked follow-up questions, and continued to allege that the officials were guilty of fraud because of the "suspicious" nature of the clarification. The Maricopa County Board of Supervisors posted an open letter to Maricopa County voters, articulating that accurate vote counting was a bipartisan commitment, and took on Sharpiegate directly: "sharpies do not invalidate ballots. We did extensive testing on multiple different types of ink with our new vote tabulation equipment. Sharpies are recommended by the manufacturer because they provide the fastest-drying ink. The offset columns on ballots ensure that any bleed-through will not impact your vote."[164]

More fact-checks appeared that same day. Arizona Secretary of State Katie Hobbs released a Twitter thread debunking Sharpiegate, with a marginally more positive effect (and over 12,000 engagements), and AZ Family News published a fact-check linking to Hobbs's tweet thread and the Maricopa County video.[165] But the misleading narrative continued to spread.

Despite these early fact-checks by government officials, the platforms' responses to the claims were neither timely nor standardized. On Twitter, some Sharpiegate content came down, other tweets were labeled, and still others were left untouched. Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok had similar responses: labeling and removing some, but not all, of the Sharpiegate content. The YouTube videos related to the Sharpiegate narrative were labeled, but none were taken down.

Despite the many efforts made by news outlets and state officials to fact-check these claims, the narrative spread quickly, and the same misleading content appeared across multiple platforms. The Sharpiegate narrative reached thou-

120

sands of individuals and inspired some of them to organize and participate in real-world protests.[166] Despite the prompt attempted debunking of these claims, belief in Sharpiegate persisted, and it was ultimately incorporated into the broader subsequent Stop the Steal narrative.

Case Study 2: Fact-Checking the Dominion Narrative

As the allegations against Dominion Voting Systems moved from Georgia to Michigan to states across the country, fact-checkers tried to keep up. On November 6, the Michigan Department of State issued a statement on its website refuting allegations that Dominion Voting Systems was responsible for voter fraud in Antrim County.[167] The statement was subsequently shared by the Michigan Department of State's Twitter account, with responses in the comments varying from gratitude for the clarification to outright denial of the Department's refutation.[168]

Similarly, on November 12, CISA released a statement certifying that there was "no evidence that any voting system deleted or lost votes, changed votes, or was in any way compromised."[169] CISA's findings were subsequently corroborated by the US Department of Justice when Attorney General Bill Barr confirmed that there was no evidence of widespread voter fraud.[170]

The narrative also centered on the swing states of Arizona, Georgia, and Pennsylvania; in each state, fact-checkers debunked the claims. In Arizona, the Maricopa County Board of Supervisors refuted claims of voter fraud by Dominion Voting Systems in a public statement.[171] The Georgia Secretary of State released a statement confirming that "the original machine count accurately portrayed the winner of the election."[172] In Pennsylvania, the state validated the accuracy of the voting machines and their official tallies, further highlighting that Dominion Voting machines had not been used in counties such as Allegheny and Philadelphia—counties that Trump falsely claimed were responsible for rigging the election.

Dominion Voting Systems released its own statement debunking claims that its systems were used to switch votes or to fraudulently cast votes. The statement cited evidence to refute claims of vote manipulation in the same four states: Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, and Pennsylvania.[173]

Though false allegations of voter fraud due to Dominion Voting machines were repeatedly debunked, propagation of misinformation relating to vote tabulation and voting interference nonetheless appears to have had a significant impact on how the 2020 election was perceived—social media commentary alleging malfeasance was extensive and widespread. Nearly a month after the election, election officials and public officials in Georgia were still continuing to hold press conferences to debunk the misinformation.[174] Even beyond that, members

of the Trump administration as well as Trump's supporters continued to pursue allegations of fraud related to the Dominion voting machines (discussed further in Chapter 4), which repeatedly reinforced claims of a rigged election among supporters. This case was an example of the balancing act that must take place when fact-checking: because fact-checking can draw further attention to misinformation or conspiracy, individuals or organizations debunking stories must take care to not unintentionally amplify narratives that could cause real world harm, fear, or suppression.[175]

3.7   Final Observations

Tickets processed by the Election Integrity Partnership and external organizations were diverse—focused on different real or purported incidents, in different states, over the course of months. The Partnership's breadth of exposure to election-related narratives provides unique insight into how misinformation evolved and the themes that cut across these discrete time periods. We conclude with five reflections on election-related misinformation narratives:

1. Researchers can predict, but not necessarily prevent, these dynamics.

On October 26, 2020, during the pre-election stage, a team of EIP researchers published a piece, "Uncertainty and Misinformation: What to Expect on Election Night and Days After."[176] This blog post presented a set of expectations, including that the winner of the election would not be known on election night, that red/blue or blue/red shifts would create opportunity for political actors and conspiracy theorists to delegitimize the election, that voting process failures would be strategically framed and overemphasized to fit misleading narratives, and that "bad statistics" would be selectively highlighted.

The EIP post demonstrates the extent to which election-related misinformation was predictable. As described throughout this chapter, many of these predictions were realized. However, ease of prediction does not necessarily correlate with ease of prevention. Although the EIP and others published advice for journalists covering the election and many journalists followed best practices, the predictable misinformation narratives still played out during and after election night. Further research should explore the effectiveness of prebunk/inoculation strategies, clear journalistic coverage, and fact-checking in the 2020 election. The post also suggests the need for more ambitious models to counter predictable election-related misinformation, and the difficulty credible journalists will face in trying to prevent election-related misinformation altogether. Platforms also, to our knowledge, did not adequately systemize the predictability of certain narratives to create preventative policies.

2. Non-falsifiable misinformation provides challenges for platforms.

The election information ecosphere was replete with non-falsifiable claims. For example, when Project Veritas relies on anonymous whistleblowers, it is difficult for independent news outlets to determine the veracity of the whisteblowers' claims. Likewise, when social media users post that a "friend of a friend" experienced or witnessed a particular event, researchers can't reliably prove that the claim of an unnamed "friend" is false.

Non-falsifiable narratives erode the information ecosphere; the clarity of fact and the power of credible voices is muddled by non-falsifiable noise. In the 2020 election, the EIP witnessed numerous non-falsifiable tickets—some labeled by platforms, others not—which contributed to broader narratives that the election was unreliable or rigged.   And when clearly falsifiable narratives were fact-checked, they still became part of the conspiratorial discourse about election fraud. Non-falsifiable information created for political gain will continue to be a challenge for platforms moving forward. But so will clearly falsifiable information, if platforms do not adequately and consistently take action against false claims.

3. Frames, not just facts, set the course.

Much of the misinformation the EIP observed in the 2020 election—including non-falsifiable content—relied on framing. As we will describe in Chapter 4, "frames highlight some bits of information about an item that is the subject of a communication, thereby elevating them in salience."[177] Whether a mail-dumping incident is seen as a one-off mistake by a postal service agent or as Democrats stealing the election, or whether a red mirage/blue wave is evidence of mail-in ballots arriving after Election Day or a conspiracy at work, depends on how the event is framed.

Misinformation in the 2020 election cycle shows that how information is packaged largely determines the effect of that information. In Chapter 4, we'll describe how different actors use framing techniques to channel information to align with their priors and their favored outcomes.

4. From online to off—election-related misinformation can have real-world effects.

One of the biggest challenges in the misinformation research community is how to measure effects. The baseline is often to use engagement statistics—how many people like, comment, or share a post, for example. Throughout this report, we often refer to such engagement statistics. However, there is a gap between engagement on social media and change in attitudes or behaviors. Just because someone "likes" a piece of misinformation does not necessarily mean that they believe it or that it changed their view.

In this election cycle, EIP partners observed misinformation on social media form the basis of real-world actions—including the formation of activist groups and protests, and ultimately a violent insurrection at the Capitol. Misinformation in

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the pre-election stage undermined confidence in mail-in voting, delegitimizing the election process and setting the stage for post-election claims that the election was stolen. For months, right-wing social media users had been fed online "evidence" of a rigged election, coalescing into a movement to #StoptheSteal. Right-wing social media personalities—including individuals who have repeatedly been tied to spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories—created a website and email discussion list for #StoptheSteal supporters to mobilize.[178] Over a month after the election, #StoptheSteal events continued to take place nationwide—some with kinetic effects including stabbings and other violence.[179]

On January 6, the real-world effects of election-related misinformation reached fever pitch. Ali Alexander and other right-wing influencers had encouraged Trump supporters throughout the country to converge on Washington, DC, to protest in person. That morning, the President told a crowd of supporters that "this election was stolen from you, from me, from the country" and encouraged his supporters to march on the Capitol. A group of these protestors—including white supremacists and QAnon believers—violently broke into the Capitol, killing Capitol Police officer Brian Sicknick; four others died during the riot. The series of events shows that online misinformation can engender real-life radicalization with deadly consequences. Even as some social media platforms removed content from the day, the stain on American democracy remains.

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Chapter **4**

Cross-platform and Participatory Misinformation: Structure and Dynamics

4.1   Introduction

In this chapter, we attempt to understand how false and misleading narratives about the 2020 election, highlighted in Chapter 3, took shape and spread across a multiplatform information ecosystem. During the 2020 election, misinformation was shared across a range of social media—from broadly popular platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, to niche sites like Reddit, to up-and-coming sites like Periscope and TikTok, to "alt-platforms" such as Parler, and to message boards such as the chans or thedonald.win. These diverse platforms were leveraged in distinct and often complementary ways by those spreading false and misleading information about the election. Additionally, algorithmic curation systems shape the dynamics of social networks, and behaviors that manifest across them, as engagement begets algorithmic amplification, complicating the story of how content is created, disseminated, and reaches end users. Here we examine the underlying structure of this ecosystem—the different platforms involved, and the way information moves between them. We consider the affordances of their features, which enable communities to form, and enable individuals to activate those communities.

Much of the misinformation narratives that we articulated in Chapter 3 involved the active participation of ordinary people. But rank-and-file accounts and influencers alike strive to capture the attention of larger and larger audiences, in a bid, ultimately, to gain the power that such attention confers.[1] For each social platform, we consider the "work" that is done to create and spread narratives—

what we might infer as tactics as well as other dynamics—to describe how these false narratives developed, and to highlight the techniques used to produce them, spread them, and sustain them over time.

4.2   Cross-Platform Information Sharing

Each platform enables different kinds of social and information interactions; for example, TikTok's user base has a large youth component, and Parler has positioned itself as a destination for conservative users who have experienced— or have perceived they have experienced—censorship on other platforms.[2] Many of these platforms allow content sharing from other platforms, and from the broader information space that includes countless websites, from established news media outlets to conspiracy theory blogs. And though journalists and researchers sometimes draw a distinction between social media and mass media, in a broader view, there are myriad connections between them, as, for example, cable news pundits craft their evening shows based on content that went "viral" that day on social media.[3]

In addition, internet usage statistics suggest that most online information participants—or "users"—are not siloed in a single platform, but turn to different platforms for different reasons.[4] Political activists and others who wish to shape public opinion also employ multiplatform strategies, leveraging different platforms for different parts of their information strategies, and often intentionally moving content from one platform to another.

To facilitate our study of cross-platform misinformation, we grouped tickets created during our monitoring period into incidents: the information cascades that relate to a specific information event or claim, as described in Chapter 3 and discussed more fully in Chapter 5. We used a mixed-method approach to analysis, combining real-time forensic documentation of individual tickets with follow-up qualitative and quantitative analyses of specific incidents and narratives.

We observed that interactions between platforms created emergent cross-platform dynamics. For example, while Facebook was a place to reach large audiences and organize action, Twitter was a place to mobilize and "eventize" longer-form content stored elsewhere. Platform policies shaped some of these dynamics: moderation could lead to inter- and intraplatform spread, as users shared screenshots of deleted content or posted it to platforms with less stringent policies. Below we describe the roles that each platform plays in the election-related mis- and disinformation ecosystem.

**Cross-Platform Participatory Misinformation:
From Cellphone Snapshot to Nightly News**
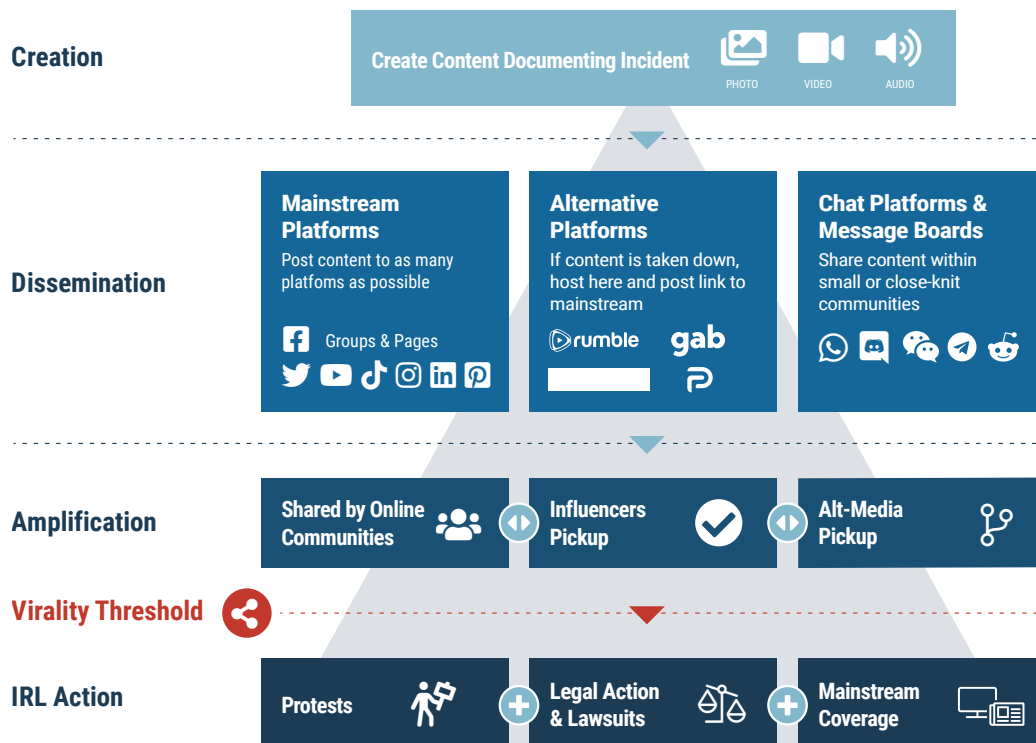
Facebook's Role: Public Posts to Reach Large Audiences; Groups for Organizing Protests

Facebook remains a widely popular social media platform, averaging around 2.7 billion active users across the globe.[5] For media outlets, information operators, and even ordinary people, Facebook represents an opportunity to reach large audiences. Public Pages can attract millions of followers, turning their creators into influencers with reach potential on par with some mass media outlets. Groups can be places where people congregate—in public and "private"— around a range of affinities. Through sharing functionality, content can move freely and rapidly between Groups, Pages, and personal accounts and their socially connected networks. Though our view into Facebook was limited to public content, we were still able to document the platform's role in the spread of several false and misleading narratives.

4.   Cross-platform and Participatory Misinformation: Structure and Dynamics

Facebook Pages as a Place to Reach Massive Audiences

A number of partisan media and other right-wing influencers who appeared in our data collection used their Facebook Pages to spread false and misleading information about the election. Often, this was part of a multiplatform media strategy. On Facebook, this content received significant engagement, including tens of thousands of reshares for some posts and moving from public Pages to personal Facebook feeds.

Facebook Groups as a Place to Share Rumors and Organize

Facebook Groups, both public and private, served as virtual places to come together and share stories of perceived election fraud and to organize a collective response. Perhaps the most successful was the STOP THE STEAL Facebook Group (discussed in detail in Chapter 3). The public Group started as a place to share stories, both first- and secondhand, about a potential "stolen election"—stories that were subsequently reshared through Facebook and cross-posted to other platforms. It grew rapidly, reaching 320,000 users in less than a day, assisted by cross-posted advertisements from right-wing influencers on Twitter.[6] It, along with other Facebook Groups, quickly evolved into a place to organize protests; as some of the rhetoric grew violent and election workers were threatened, Facebook removed STOP THE STEAL less than a day after launch. Nevertheless, similar groups, albeit at smaller scales, continued to emerge after this takedown, as people looked for places to gather and ways to coordinate protest. In one case, a group of individuals organized a peaceful protest using a private Facebook Group.[7] But their call-to-action was spread publicly and lost contextualizing information along the way, which led to a more chaotic protest.

Twitter's Role: Mobilizing Content from Other Platforms; Connecting to Media Outlets and other Influencers; Networked Framing

Mobilizing Content from Other Platforms

In the cross-platform spread of misinformation about the election, the Twitter platform served several diverse roles. A primary role was to provide a place to draw attention to content such as news articles, videos, and livestreams hosted elsewhere in the media ecosystem. The real-time nature of the platform provided an opportunity to connect existing content to the current news cycle, while platform affordances like short-form messaging and hashtag referencing enabled seemingly disparate narratives to be cross-referenced and integrated

from other sources. In particular, cross-posting from YouTube to Twitter was salient in our election integrity incidents, as shown in Figure 4.1.
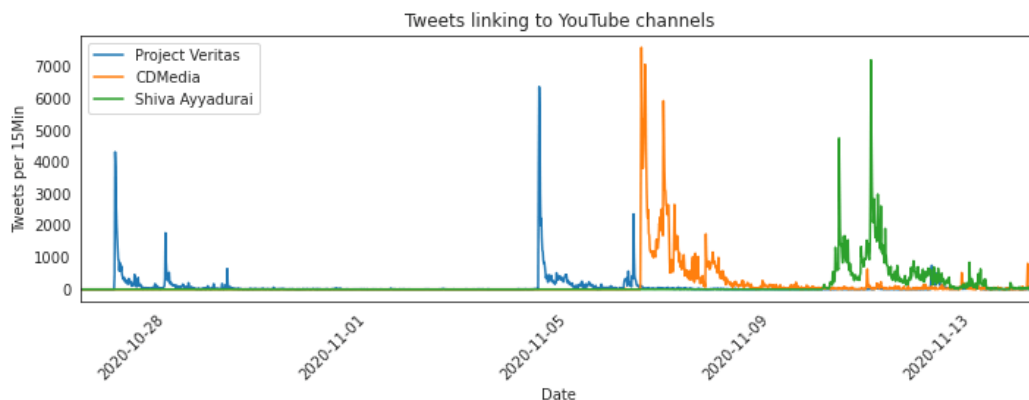

Figure 4.1: Temporal graph of tweets and retweets linking to prominent YouTube channels over time, in tweets per 15 minutes, for three prominent repeat spreaders (described in Chapter 5).

By cross-posting their videos to Twitter, repeat spreaders worked to popularize videos alleging election fraud. In some cases, the Twitter spikes align closely with the release of a new video. The tweets linking to Project Veritas, a right-leaning activist media group, follow this pattern—each burst is related to a different video. In other cases, e.g., tweets linking to compilation videos produced by right-leaning CDMedia and Dr. Shiva Ayyadurai (a coronavirus and election-related conspiracy theorist and anti-vaccine activist, also known as Dr. Shiva), the same video is mobilized (re-introduced and widely spread) multiple times. Information cascades related to content from Project Veritas and Ayyadurai are described in Chapter 5.

YouTube was not the only platform to serve as host for long-form videos subsequently linked to Twitter to reach a larger audience. For example, Ayyadurai's statistics-based content was regularly hosted on Periscope but cross-posted on Twitter to expand viewership and connect with other incidents using hashtags and tagging influential users.

Connecting to Influencers

Twitter also allowed prominent spreaders of election-related mis- and disinformation to direct the attention of their own large audiences, as well as other influencers, to a specific piece of content; the content was then amplified across platforms by this audience of influential users, journalists, and politicians, including President Trump, his campaign team, and his family.

The cross-platform nature of this amplification draws attention to the dynamics of "networked framing" (see box on page 166). Twitter often served as the focal

point for these collective narratives. In addition to the size of its audience, the platform's mobile connectivity enabled disconnected fraud narratives to be drawn together and assembled into specific frames (i.e., widespread election fraud) using content from other websites and social media platforms.

For example, the Hammer and Scorecard/Dominion narratives described in Chapter 3 began with claims of poll glitches in online conversations on websites and Twitter, then spread through YouTube videos and the use of hashtags related to the incident on Twitter and other platforms, such as Parler and Reddit. From there, high-profile accounts drew further attention to the incidents, as did hyperpartisan news websites like The Gateway Pundit, which used Twitter to promote its article discussing the incident.[8] This collective Dominion narrative spread has since grown, having been subsequently promoted by the Proud Boys, The Western Journal, and Mike Huckabee across a number of platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Telegram, Parler, and Gab.[9] On each platform, these narratives remain tethered together by relying on the Twitter hashtags #dominionvotingsystems and #dominionsoftware. By bouncing unreliable evidence back and forth from Twitter to other social media platforms, what were initially unremarkable incidents confined to local counties became a national story, much like the Stop The Steal and Sharpiegate narratives.

Megathreads

An additional technique unique to Twitter, due to its specific affordances around threading and content temporality, was the use of "megathreads"—dozens or even hundreds of tweets connected through reply-chains—to connect a mix of real incidents as well as false and misleading claims into a long narrative alleging fraud and attempting to delegitimize the election. One such thread featured detailed allegations of fraud, state-by-state, through over 100 author-appended replies to a single tweet, linking to a number of external website sources and content on other social media platforms. These types of threads leverage platform-specific design affordances: the list-based nature of megathreads allows them to be recycled in terms of their visibility and engagement each time a new item is added to the list.

Cross-Platform Sharing to Evade Moderation on Twitter

For both Twitter megathreads and single posts spreading misinformation, the cross-platform nature of these narratives also limited the efficacy of the platform's response. We saw numerous cases in which misinformation first shared on Twitter continued to spread on other platforms even after it was removed—in some cases, a simple screenshot of the since-removed tweet was shared elsewhere —as illustrated in Figure 4.2 on the facing page.
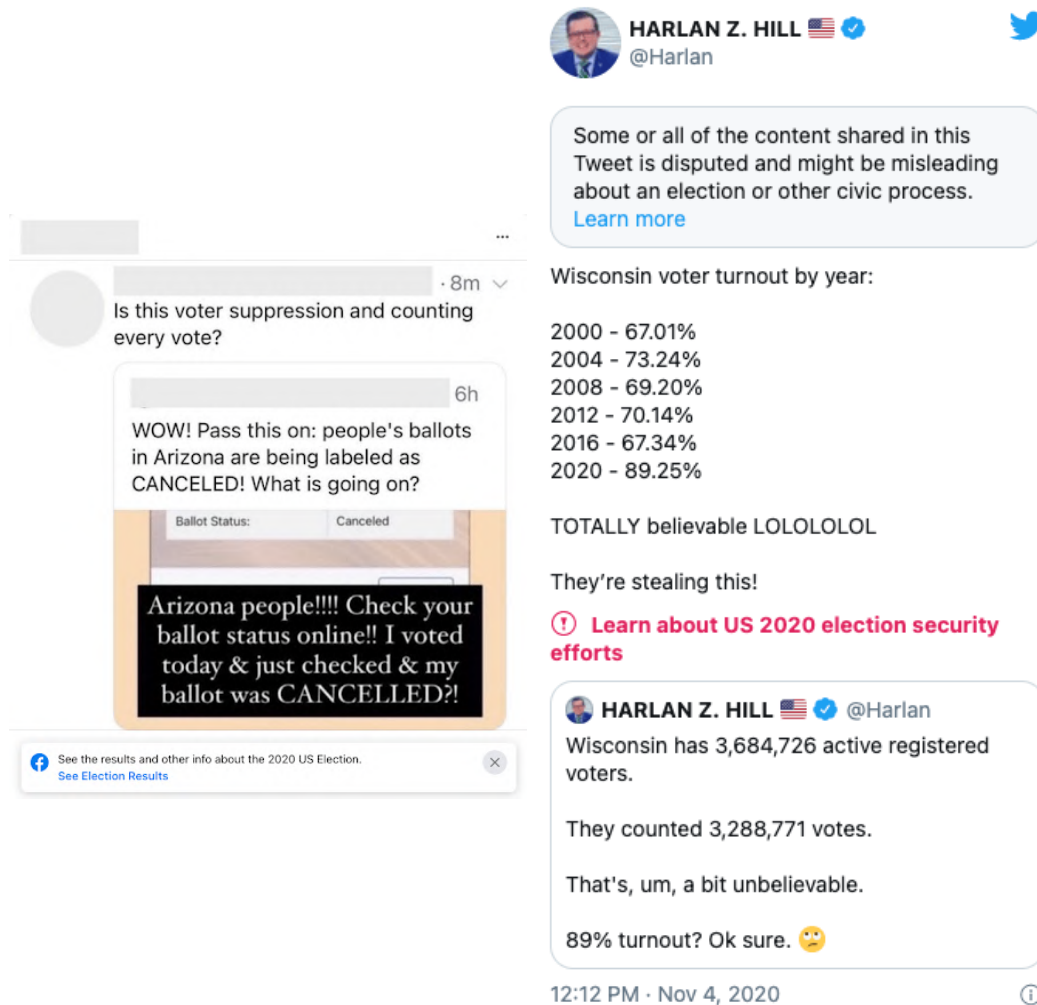
Figure 4.2: Screenshots of cross-posting on Facebook (left) and Reddit (right).

On the left, we see a Facebook user posting a screenshot of his own reply on Twitter to perpetuate a disproven narrative even after it was removed on Twitter. On the right we find a similar instance on Reddit, where a tweet by political consultant Harlan Hill alleging a stolen election was hidden behind a label on Twitter but is presented in full on Reddit.

In these ways and others, Twitter served to perpetuate and amplify misinformation narratives despite efforts to limit its involvement.

4. Cross-platform and Participatory Misinformation: Structure and Dynamics

YouTube's Role: A Resource for Livestreams, Compilations, and Mobilizations

Most major platforms now have the capacity for sharing video; however, YouTube exists as a uniquely popular platform for videos that are long-format and can be monetized. While search and recommendation functions exist within YouTube, traffic is often driven from other platforms. During the 2020 election, YouTube provided a space for video-format misinformation that could be shared easily across platforms. The platform functioned both to provide official and familiar-looking "evidence" for misleading narratives and to consolidate otherwise disparate narratives as part of a broader picture.

Compilation and Long-Form Videos

One effective form of YouTube content—in terms of spreading misleading narratives about the election—were compilations, or videos that synthesized content across different events and narratives.[10] Though these longer videos may not have the potential for mass virality, they exist as touchstones for other misinformation superspreaders to continuously refer back to—from other locations in the information ecosystem—as supportive evidence of the veracity of their narratives.

These YouTube videos presented challenges to media literacy. They were typically produced by partisan news outlets or users and organizations with a large presence on other platforms. These groups harnessed high production quality and verified accounts to create videos that either misled the public through deceptive editing or compiled multiple false and misleading narratives. Mainstream, cable, and hyperpartisan news outlets alike host content on YouTube, and much of it has a similar format, look, and feel. For example, Project Veritas's videos often begin with host James O'Keefe sitting in what appears to be a well-established newsroom, and Shiva Ayyadurai's videos present him as an expert source on a television news show.

Another consequence of the long-form, multinarrative nature of YouTube videos is that misinformation—and even more so, disinformation—can be difficult for the general public to discern. A video containing several distinct narratives would require substantial time on the part of a scrupulous viewer to evaluate. This long-winded approach to misinforming can overwhelm, creating the impression of election fraud without the viewer critically evaluating, or even remembering, the slate of "evidence."

Livestreams

YouTube is also used to build an audience for a unique type of content producer—the livestreamer.[11] Several of the top accounts in our YouTube analyses are

conservative influencers who have used YouTube Live to build their following and subsequently spread mis- and disinformation. These include right-wing pundit Stephen Crowder, who hosts a daily livestreamed commentary show, and Dr. Ayyadurai. The YouTube Live feature (and its counterparts on other platforms, such as Facebook Live) create complex moderation challenges for platforms wishing to minimize misinformation, as the streams are often boosted in the moment by platform algorithms, though there is little opportunity to address claims in real time. Videos often persist on the platform permanently, where they continue to rack up views. However, in their permanent state they may be labeled. The top-viewed video in our data sample, for instance, is a livestream by Stephen Crowder titled "Live Updates: Democrats Try to Steal Election!?" that aired on November 4 and has subsequently gained over 5 million views. It was eventually labeled: "Robust safeguards help ensure the integrity of election results."

Long-Tail Platforms for Unique Formats and Niche Communities

As mainstream platforms tend to exhibit some content moderation, these actions feed into narratives of "censorship," leading some users to seek alternative forums. These range from smaller platforms like TikTok, to almost entirely unmoderated spaces like 8Kun and Discord, to places where moderation is minimal, like Parler[12] and some subreddits. The entirely unregulated spaces function as a breeding ground for more extreme narratives involving the Deep State, QAnon, and encouragement of political violence. However, these platforms' relatively small user base necessitates misinformation leaking or being ported into more mainstream sites in order for it to have impact.

Misinformation Narratives Reappearing on TikTok

One phenomenon we observed was content that originated on other platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, then reappeared on TikTok. A common tactic was the use of TikTok's "green screen" feature, where users create a video with an uploaded image, screen capture, or video as the background. For example, as displayed in Figure 4.3 on the next page, tweets that shared misleading graphs aimed to delegitimize the election results in Michigan and Wisconsin were reshared as backgrounds on TikTok, where users discussed the conspiracies.

Sometimes, content was actioned by one platform while it persisted unactioned on another. Figure 4.4 on page 159 below shows how one user, when TikTok took down a debunked video, used the platform's green screen function to direct

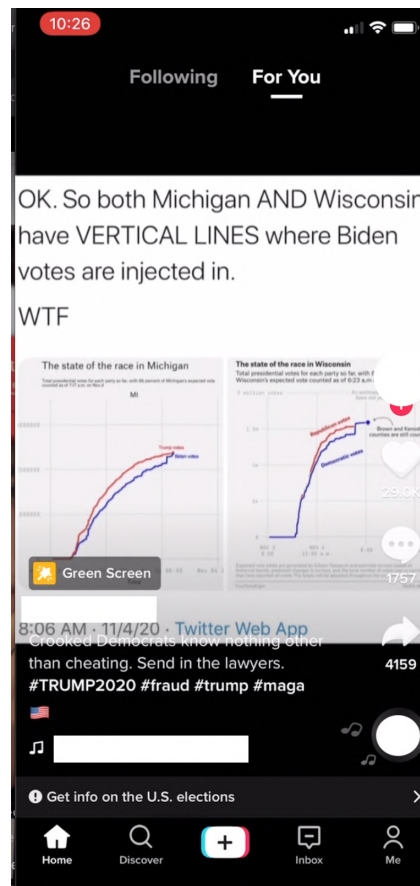4. Cross-platform and Participatory Misinformation: Structure and Dynamics

Figure 4.3: A TikTok user reshares a tweet displaying misleading graphs to support the false narrative that the results in Michigan and Wisconsin have been rigged. The video received 29,000 views, 1,751 comments, and 4,159 shares before being taken down.

his followers to the same video on Instagram. TikTok and Instagram have since removed both videos.

Instagramming Screenshots of Posts on Other Platforms

Similar to TikTok, misleading content about the election on other platforms appeared later on Instagram. For example, several of the highly engaged-with Instagram posts from repeat spreaders consisted of screenshots of tweets—often tweets authored by other people. Many of these images included additional visual effects, such as added or crossed-out text, to reinforce, refine, or counter the meaning or framing in the original content. Some of the most influential repeat spreaders used Instagram as part of a multiplatform strategy, adapting their content to Instagram's image-based format.
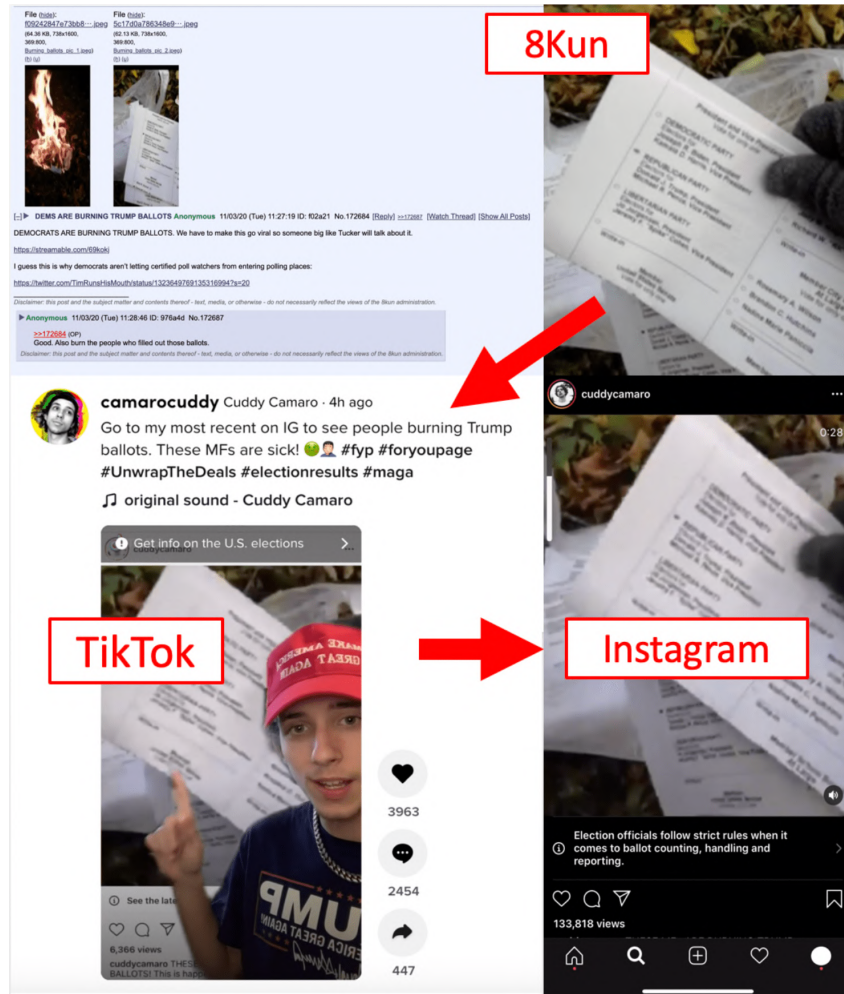
Figure 4.4: Cross-platform spread of a now-debunked video. Top left, a video allegedly showing burning ballots is posted to 8Kun on November 3, 2020, 11:27 am PT. Top right, a screen capture of the video that was posted to 8Kun. Bottom left, the next day at 2:00 pm PT, TikTok user Cuddy Camaro (@camarocuddy) posted a video using the 8kun video as his green screen. In the video, Camaro states that TikTok won't let him upload the video, so he directs people to his Instagram account (@cuddycamaro), where he has posted the video. Bottom right, on Instagram, his post with the video received over 133,000 views by November 4, 2020, 5:00 pm PT, before it was taken down a few hours later.

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Parler as an Emerging Meeting Place for Right Wing Influencers and Audiences

Parler was another smaller, emergent platform that came to play a significant role in the 2020 election as a community for pro-Trump activism and perpetuation of pro-Trump conspiracy theories post-election.[13] Unlike other platforms involved in the active, participatory cross-platform information flows described in this section, Parler largely served as something of an echo chamber set apart from the major platforms. While content from websites, Twitter, and YouTube were shared to Parler, the reverse was infrequent.

Parler was established in 2018 as a "censorship-resistant" platform catering to right-leaning users and funded by conservative donors, including Rebekah Mercer. Its founders and early adopters—such as part-owner and prominent pro-Trump policital commentator Dan Bongino—recruited its userbase from right-leaning audiences who had come to feel that mainstream platforms were censoring them. Several of Parler's earliest prominent accounts were individuals who had, in fact, been deplatformed on mainstream social media for specific rules violations, such as Alex Jones and Roger Stone.[14] Users joined in bursts that were often tied to a particular allegation of censorship; in late June 2020, for example, when Twitter's application of a fact-check label to President Trump's tweets outraged his fan base, and again, in October 2020, when mainstream platforms chose to down-rank or not host private adult content from Hunter Biden's laptop. On Parler, such content was easy to find. Parler's commitment to "free speech" (and to not fact-checking information)[15] meant that some of the wilder conspiracy theories and rhetoric about stolen elections— particularly rhetoric with violent undertones—were contextualized, throttled, or taken down by major platforms but moved freely within the Parler community. Members of communities on larger platforms, such as Facebook Groups, recognized this; we observed users within Groups that focused on election rumors and misinformation encouraging other members to create Parler accounts so that they could talk about the claims there.

Parler's user base saw significant growth in the days after the election.[16] Many of its users joined because of their belief in conspiratorial narratives such as Hammer and Scorecard, which remained popular on Parler nearly two months after the election. However, Parler lacked certain features, such as Groups and the ability to sort by top posts, that have made its larger competitors more effective as places to convene for online activism. After its decision not to moderate violent content in the days leading up to the January 6 insurrection at the Capitol, it also struggled to retain hosting: Amazon, Apple, and Google each took action to remove it from their infrastructure, and it was only back online, with a new hosting service, as of February 16, 2021.

Messaging Tools

Beyond platforms, false and misleading claims also proliferated via messaging tools. For example, multiple Miami residents received texts claiming that antifa and BLM protestors planned to terrorize the Miami area following the election. This example highlights how misinformation can be highly localized and originate from sources other than social or broadcast media.

Figure 4.5: A text sent to some Miami residents falsely warning about antifa and BLM protesters.

Cross-Platform Migration as a Demand-Side Issue

Not only did content move across platforms—users themselves moved as well. Researchers often focus on the supply-side of mis- and disinformation— such as how misinformation spreads and its prominence during election cycles.[17] In the 2020 election, the response of social media users to content moderation policies—namely, migrating to alternative platforms such as Parler— foregrounded the demand side of misinformation as well.

In line with their content moderation policies, and as described in Chapters 2 and 6, Twitter and Facebook used labeling and content removal to limit election-related misinformation on their websites. A subset of social media users responded to such moderation with claims of liberal censorship, and migrated to platforms with weaker content moderation policies, like Parler. Parler CEO John Matze said that more than 4.5 million new people signed up for the platform in about a week. While it's yet to be seen whether Parler's newfound popularity

will continue (some evidence suggests Parler has seen a drop in usage from its pre-election days, and the platform has only recently regained a hosting service after the major ones dropped it), the migration suggests that content moderation by the major platforms won't solve the misinformation crisis entirely.

4.3   Dynamics of 2020 Election Misinformation

The Timeline

Misleading information about the 2020 election followed interesting temporal dynamics. In Chapter 3 we trace the evolution of the narratives—stories created by misinformation echoed past stories and gave momentum to the next wave; here, we follow how those stories traveled across the election misinformation landscape over time. During the pre-election period, efforts to preemptively delegitimize the election often appeared to be top-down, spreading through right-wing media and accounts of political figures.[18] But they were also, in many cases, decentralized, with one-off incidents bubbling up through social media before reaching influencers and their large audiences. Together, these dynamics worked to foment a general distrust in the election.

Election Day served as a day of data collection for partisan actors, who would later leverage individual tweets and stories as evidence for broader claims. Motivated by growing fears of a "rigged" election, a large number of people went to the polls looking for evidence of voting fraud. Many documented and used social media to share their experiences of perceived and real issues with the voting process, sharing videos, images, and personal accounts. Politically motivated individuals watching from home on social media contributed by amplifying content that aligned with their views or goals.

In the week after Election Day, pro-Trump political operatives, right-wing media outlets, and other content creators—primarily though not exclusively on the political right—assembled evidence from Election Day into larger narratives attempting to delegitimize the results. Armchair statisticians combed available vote tallies looking for anomalies that could be framed as potential fraud. YouTube opportunists made long-form videos connecting different incidents to the "electoral fraud" meta-narrative. Though initially chaotic, the information space began to concentrate on smaller incidents that were swept into larger narratives or growing conspiracy theories.

Post election, false claims and misleading narratives began to coalesce around allegations of fraud in swing-state cities that favored Biden. Subsequent court cases seeking to throw out votes in these areas based on the allegations shed light on the motivation for this refocusing. A common tactic involved linking statistical evidence with unfounded claims of vote-tabulation fraud. Diffuse pre-

and post-election narratives were blended and presented as walls of evidence. Donald Trump and members of his legal team were instrumental in pushing these narratives, strategically employing them in an effort to overturn the results of the election through legal proceedings. Now, we can see some storylines have taken root, developing into more hardened conspiracy theories that may linger for years to come.

One remarkable phenomenon is the persistence of certain narratives—e.g., that the election would be "rigged"—from the start of our data collection through the end. These narratives were already prevalent when we began our work in August, and as we write this report, participation in the narratives challenging the integrity of the 2020 election is ongoing, with new "evidence" still being added to the conversation, even as the discourse has converged around a few specific conspiracy theories. Research suggests that the conspiracy-theory type of misinformation will have the most staying power—as opposed to more ephemeral rumors that were quickly determined to be false.[19] In particular, claims that are difficult to verify and theories that are impossible to falsify—for example, theories that software on voting machines switches votes without leaving a trace—will likely continue to spread for years to come. These conspiracy theories can become the tools of future disinformation campaigns, and they risk long-term effects such as the continued delegitimization of democratic institutions.

Participatory Mis- and Disinformation

Our analysis demonstrates that the production and spread of misinformation and disinformation about Election 2020—including false narratives of a "stolen election"—was participatory. In other words, these dynamics were not simply top-down from elites to their audiences, but were bottom-up as well, with members of the "crowd" contributing in diverse ways—from posting raw content, to providing frames for that content, to amplifying aligned messages from both everyday members of the crowd and media (including social media) elites.

Repeatedly, our data reveal politically motivated people sincerely introducing content they mistakenly believed demonstrated real issues with election integrity: from the user who claimed back in early September that a ballot in their name had been sent to their parent's home in another state (weeks before ballots had actually been mailed out); to the man who thought that old ballots (from 2018) in a dumpster were evidence of 2020 mail-in ballot fraud; to the person who thought they were capturing video evidence of a poll worker illegally moving ballots on Election Day (it was a photographer moving his gear); to people who were given Sharpies to complete their ballots and mistakenly believed their votes therefore would not be counted.

4. Cross-platform and Participatory Misinformation: Structure and Dynamics

Well-meaning, though often politically motivated, individuals repeatedly introduced this content into the broader information sphere, often via social media. In each of these incidents, the person originally reporting the issue (and many of those who passed it along) may have sincerely thought they had found evidence of voter fraud. However, it is also likely—especially considering what we know about confirmation bias[20]—that political views and prevailing narratives about potential election fraud both contributed to these individuals' misinterpretation of what they were experiencing and motivated them to share the content.

> **Networked Framing: How Right-Wing Media and Social Media Influencers Helped to Frame "Evidence" of Ballot and Voting Issues as "Election Fraud"**
>
> In Chapter 3, we noted the role of "framing," or providing scaffolding for selected information to shape how people interpret the world, in helping to create and sustain the false "stolen election" narrative. Traditional notions of framing often place the power of creating and communicating frames within the domain of media elites.[21] With the rise of participatory media and disruption of the historical role of "gatekeepers," researchers have documented the phenomenon of "networked framing," where diverse members of online communities—including political and media elites, social media influencers, and to some extent anyone with a social media account—collaborate to create and propagate certain frames.[22]
>
> In our analyses, we repeatedly saw this kind of networked framing in action. Diverse social media users—from anonymous accounts with small followings, to blue-check social media influencers, to accounts associated with hyperpartisan media outlets—were consistently helping to do the work of "framing" by assigning intent to, or exaggerating, real-world events in their posts, in such a way as to fit the narrative of election fraud. Though networked framing practices could be seen, to some extent, on "both sides" of the political spectrum, our data show that right-wing networks were far more active and influential (in terms of dissemination) in discourse that threatened election integrity (see Chapter 5, Figure 5.1 on page 186).
>
> One example of this networked framing activity occurred in late September 2020, when a batch of mail—originally reported to have absentee ballots—was discovered in a ditch in Greenville, Wisconsin.[23]
>
> There was not, nor has there been discovered since, any evidence that this mail-dumping incident was politically motivated. Despite the lack of any evidence, this event was quickly picked up and positioned within the voter fraud frame—and the story eventually propagated widely within that frame, reinforcing the false perception of mail-in voting contributing to widespread election fraud.

The story of ballots in a ditch first appears (in significant numbers) in our data through an article on The Gateway Pundit,[24] which often works by selecting content from other sources and positioning that content within their highly political frames. In this case, The Gateway Pundit repurposed an article from a local (FOX11) news outlet.[25] In addition to embedding the content of that borrowed article in its text, The Gateway Pundit article added four sentences of original content.

Its first sentence, which appeared above the borrowed content, made the framing clear. Without any evidence connecting the incident to anyone with a political motive, The Gateway Pundit's article began with: "Democrats are stealing the 2020 election." Next were two sentences making factual claims borrowed from the FOX11 article—that two trays of mail had been found and that they included absentee ballots. And finally the article attempted to make a connection between that mail and Democrats by stating that "The USPS unions support Joe Biden."

Those four sentences and the borrowed content are the entire article. Without evidence, it frames the improperly discarded mail as election "stealing" by Democrats. That article—and therefore that frame—spread widely on Twitter. It was tweeted/retweeted nearly 25,000 times. In total, we collected 60,000 tweets that referenced the incident.

The early propagation of the narrative was assisted by @Rasmussen_Poll (through an original tweet linking to The Gateway Pundit's article) and @EricTrump (through a retweet). Other online accounts picked up and advanced that voter fraud frame, calling it "LEFTIST VOTER FRAUD" and stating through a hashtag that "#DemocratsAreCheaters."

A few prominent social media accounts picked up the story with a slightly more subtle framing. For example, the tweet below, posted by another verified repeat spreader account, does not explicitly claim voter fraud, but shapes the interpretive frame toward "voter fraud" — or at the very least toward doubting the integrity of mail-in voting—by highlighting that the mail was "FOUND IN DITCH" and that it included "ABSENTEE ballots."

Chuck Callesto ✔
@ChuckCallesto

BREAKING REPORT: US Mail FOUND IN DITCH in Rural Wisconsin Included ABSENTEE Ballots...

2:57 PM · Sep 23, 2020 · Twitter Web App

7.8K Retweets   **430** Quote Tweets   **9.1K** Likes

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> Tweet from Chuck Callesto framing a mail-dumping issue as an election integrity concern.
>
> This event—and its framing as a "voter fraud" issue—eventually made it into a public statement by Kayleigh McEnany, White House press secretary.[26]
>
> This example demonstrates how hyperpartisan media and other prominent social media users on the political right reframed events in misleading ways to feed false narratives of widespread election fraud by Democrats. It also reveals another dynamic that we saw repeatedly across these incidents, where local media coverage was opportunistically appropriated and often recontextualized to fit election fraud narratives.
>
> Similarly, the Sharpiegate narrative (described in detail in Chapter 3.3 on page 49) took shape through networked framing. Early tweets—from voters in various locations on Election Day—highlighted somewhat open-ended concerns about Sharpies bleeding through ballots. Tweets and retweets framing the concerns as potential voter fraud were often generated by less prominent accounts, including voters describing perceived issues with their own ballots and "grassroots" political activists relaying and occasionally reframing those concerns. Often, accounts with smaller follower numbers would add @mentions of more prominent accounts to try to gain their attention and potentially gain traction for their content through a high-profile retweet or quote tweet. Those influencers and political media elites then used the claims to bolster the "rigged election" narrative.
>
> Together, these examples show how networked framing—including selecting certain pieces of evidence and placing it within the voter fraud frame—was not the exclusive terrain of high-profile accounts, but also incorporated the work of voters motivated to share their experiences and politically active social media users helping to identify and amplify potential cases of voter fraud.

For example, President Trump's many statements (including tweets) about the election being "rigged" may have sufficiently primed his supporters to be on the lookout for evidence of election fraud by the time the Trump campaign's "Army for Trump" called for them to perform as formal and informal poll observers. The primary objective of these militarized calls to action was to motivate and organize the mass collection of purported "evidence" of election fraud. The social media data we collected reveal a large number of people searching for, and often mistakenly "finding," evidence of the election fraud they believed was occurring—and then, in a case of participatory disinformation, actively sharing and resharing this kind of content.

Once introduced onto social media, these cases of false witnesses of "election fraud" were frequently picked up and amplified by influencers and rank-and-file accounts alike. Often, the person who introduced the content or another active social media user would try to call the attention of more prominent influencers to potentially relevant content by reposting with tags and/or mentions of more large-audience accounts. Those more influential accounts—often accounts of hyperpartisan media, conservative political figures, and other elite right-wing influencers—played the role of assembling this content to fit the larger narratives (e.g., a "rigged election") and of spreading it to increasingly large audiences.
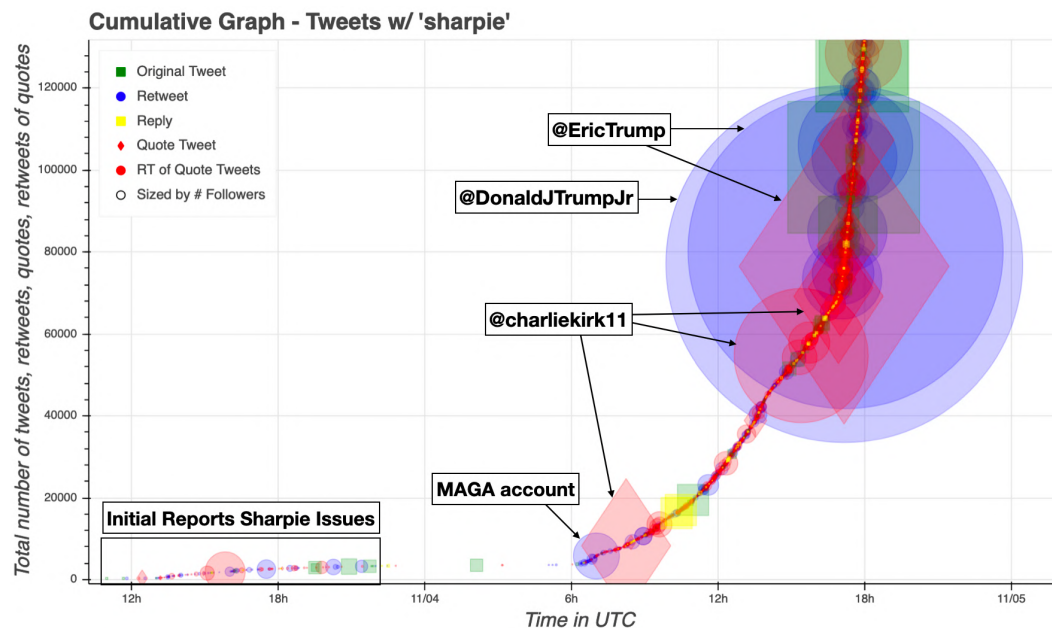

Figure 4.6: Cumulative graph of Sharpie tweets on November 3 (Election Day) and November 4. Individual tweets are plotted at the time they were shared and sized by the number of followers of the account posting them. Color and shape represent tweet type: original tweets in green squares, reply tweets in yellow squares, retweets in blue circles, quote tweets in red diamonds, and retweets of quote tweets in red circles.

Figure 4.6, the cumulative graph of the early spread of "Sharpiegate" rumors, shows the process of participatory disinformation. The conversation started relatively small—with many small-follower accounts often tweeting their own experiences—and then began to gain traction through quote tweets and retweets by accounts with increasingly large audiences, eventually taking off with the help of President Trump's two adult sons.

In dozens of election-integrity incidents, these false or misleading narratives eventually reached the inner echelons of the Trump campaign. In a few notable cases, we saw the narratives move beyond social media into large television audiences through President Trump's debate performances.

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Friend-of-a-Friend Narratives

One type of participatory misinformation we saw was the "friend-of-a-friend" story.[27] These pieces of evidence, which were often wrapped into larger narratives about disenfranchisement or election fraud, reference a story that the person "heard" from someone else, and the content can extend to increasing degrees of separation—the "friend-of-a-friend." One story asserted that a person's friend had voted for Biden and the machine changed her vote to Trump (see Figure 4.7).
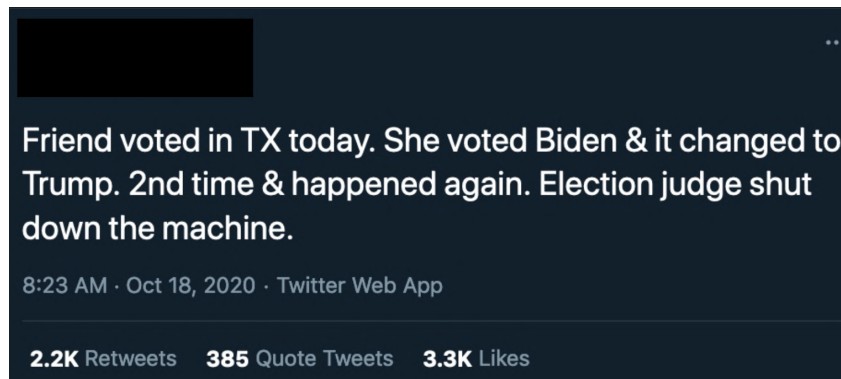

Figure 4.7: A tweet claiming that a voting machine changed their friend's vote from Trump to Biden.

This story spread on Facebook and Twitter, and likely appeared elsewhere as well. We saw a similar dynamic, though to a smaller extent in terms of spread, around claims that a Trump supporter had been redirected to the wrong polling location (see Figure 4.8).
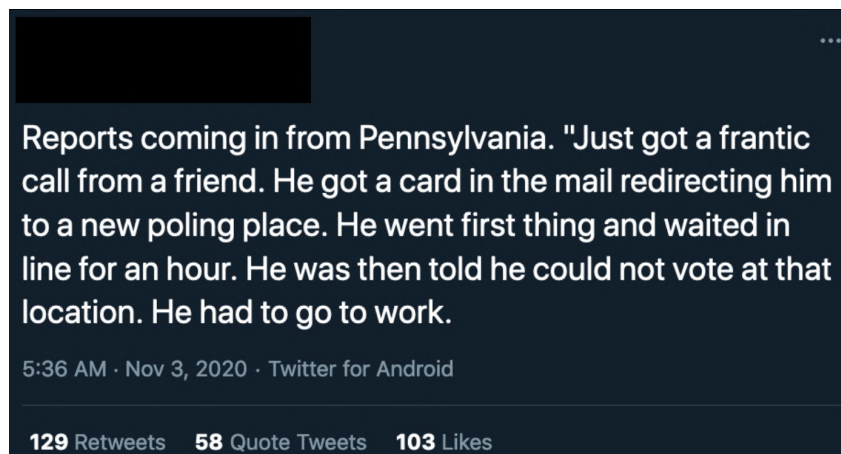

Figure 4.8: A tweet claiming that a friend was sent to the wrong voting location.

The spread of these stories has a couple of common drivers. First, "friend" can

take on new meaning in online spaces, where an otherwise stranger posting to a Facebook Group can be considered a "friend" whose message is worth spreading. This can result in often well-meaning (or at least not ill-intentioned) people passing along content ("sharing is caring") that people think will be informative or otherwise helpful to others. Second, friend-of-a-friend rumors can be intentionally copied and pasted, sometimes with small changes to minor details—referred to as copypasta—to give the sense that a large number of people have experienced a rare event. The Sharpiegate story also spread through friend-of-a-friend posts; we collected hundreds of tweets mentioning a friend whose ballot was cancelled due to the use of Sharpies.

Figure 4.9: A tweet claiming that use of a Sharpie canceled their vote.

In actuality, the online database provided the status of voters' mail-in ballots, which were canceled when they chose to vote in person.

The Use of Bad Statistics to Sow Doubt in Election Results

Elections produce vast quantities of data, from national Electoral College totals to fine-grained, precinct-level results. The sociological processes that underlie voting patterns are complex and varied, and are impacted by both structural features (i.e., the shape and size of precincts), voting process (i.e., access and eligibility), and the political landscape (i.e., candidates and issues). Each of these factors, and more, introduce patterns and benign irregularities into voting data that can be difficult or impossible to tease apart.

In the wake of the 2020 election, the scale and irregular nature of voting data was weaponized to create statistical disinformation in order to undermine confidence in the result. One of the more common tactics was to analyze precinct-level vote totals using Benford's law. In brief, Benford's law makes predictions about the frequency of first and/or second digits in a dataset. Violations of these predictions have been used to some success as a tool for detecting financial fraud, and have gained traction in recent years as a potential mechanism for determining electoral fraud, despite well-documented theoretical and practical limitations.[28]

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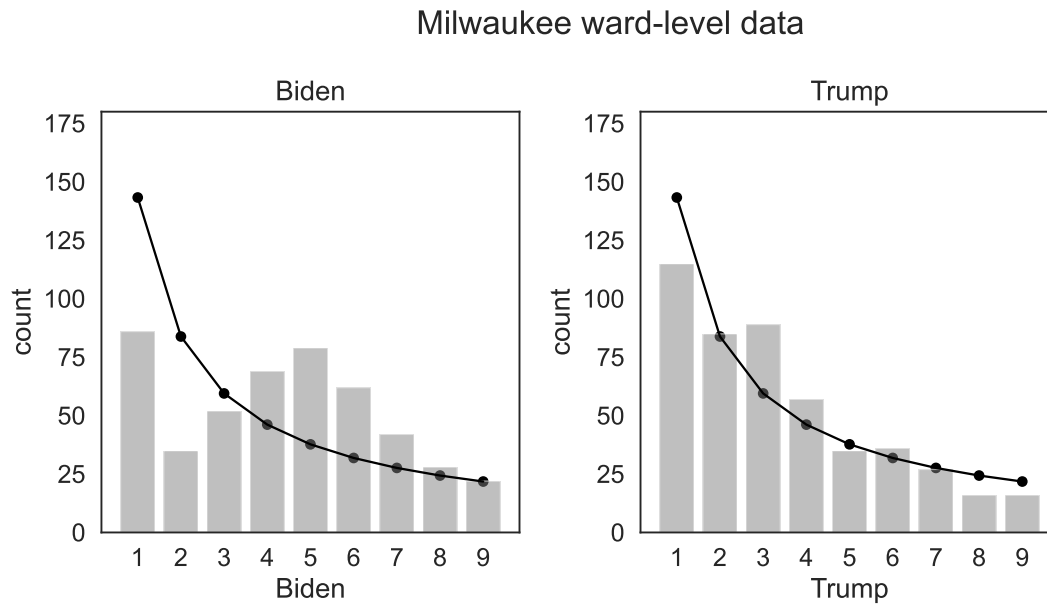
Milwaukee ward-level data

Figure 4.10: Ward-level analysis of first digits of vote totals in Milwaukee in the 2020 election, redrawn from original data but similar to observed misinformation. The line indicates Benford's law, whereas the bars indicate the observed frequencies of first digits from 1 to 9.

One prominent example of disinformation invoking Benford's law involved the vote totals for wards in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, as seen in Figure 4.10. While Trump's vote totals approximated Benford's law, Biden's had a surplus of digits 4 through 6, and a dearth of digits 1 and 2. This was promoted as definitive evidence of election fraud on both far-right websites and social media platforms like Reddit, Facebook, and Twitter. However, the true cause was much more benign. The excess digits are a signal of Biden's lead and average precinct size, and not indicative of fraud.[29] More generally, Benford's law is not expected to be followed when data do not span several orders of magnitude or for voting processes in general.[30]

The misinformation surrounding Benford's law follows a familiar pattern. A statistical model sets up an (often flawed) expectation of how voting data should appear. Violations of this expectation occur, either due to chance (i.e., checking many locations), a mismatch between the data and model's assumptions, or an inappropriate application of the statistical model. Ethical, well-meaning statisticians discovering an irregularity would then get to work understanding whether it arose as a problem with the model (i.e., failing to account for demographics), the data (i.e., a rounding/processing error), an honest mistake, or in rare cases, fraud. In cases of misinformation, irregularities are taken as prima facie proof of fraud.

In another example, Shiva Ayyadurai posted a fraught analysis, choosing variables

that artificially created the impression that Trump did more poorly than expected in more Republican areas to suggest voting machines were changing votes to Joe Biden.[31] He further used the imposed negative slope to estimate purported switched votes, which fed into misleading narratives about Dominion voting software (discussed in more detail in Chapter 3).

These are two of many ways in which election data was weaponized to promote false narratives of widespread electoral fraud. This tactic is particularly challenging, as it simultaneously creates the impression of widespread fraud while leveraging statistical analyses that average citizens cannot reasonably be expected to critique, leading them to accept claims of technical meddling at face value. Debunking can be challenging even for statistically proficient academics, as no affordable academic-facing API exists to gather election data in real time. We observed that when data is available, it can require unique solutions to access and clean into a usable format (i.e., scraping PDFs or websites). In many cases, data were simply unavailable, were of low quality (e.g., just percentages), or would require ethically or legally questionable scraping. Freed from legal and data-quality constraints, purveyors of statistical disinformation remain at an advantage.

Organized Outrage: Online Misinformation's Offline Impact

The spread and impact of misinformation is not merely confined to the online world. Indeed, many of the narratives we explored explicitly called for, and resulted in, offline actions. Pre-election, this was seen most clearly in the #ArmyforTrump hashtag, in which the Trump campaign and right-leaning influencers directed supporters to sign up to become poll watchers for the campaign and to submit purported evidence of electoral fraud to the campaign team. Trump's legal campaign in the weeks post-election repeatedly relied upon questionable public testimonies of fraudulent behaviors in legal challenges to courts across the country. These affidavits and public testimonies are the consequence of the public priming of fraud pushed by the #ArmyforTrump campaign (along with the many other election fraud narratives discussed in this paper), and a weaponization of the information elicited through the digital disinformation campaign.

Similarly, misinformation narratives that arose on Election Day itself led to in-person organized outrage, as seen most notably around the #Sharpiegate conspiracy. Despite swift debunking from election officials in Arizona, the #Sharpiegate theory gained traction across local Facebook Groups and on Twitter. This culminated in protestors gathering outside the vote counting center in Maricopa County shouting about the conspiracy and chanting to "stop the count."

Similar protests in swing states across the country were coordinated by social media misinformation campaigns like #Sharpiegate and the more national Stop The Steal campaign. The protests not only targeted key election sites but were organized more generally in larger cities across the US, including large-scale demonstrations in Washington, DC. These in-person events gave new life to election misinformation, cementing its believability by affording them physical presence and further weakening the ability of fact-checkers to counter their spread. The organized outrage facilitated by blue-check influencers thus leveraged misinformation to organize mass protests that further delegitimized the electoral process and its results.

From Manipulating the Information System to Leveraging the Legal System

Mis- and disinformation that originated and spread online eventually gained an offline presence in the courts. Buried in the litany of lawsuits filed by the Trump campaign in the post-election period were the same participatory mis- and disinformation cascades traceable to online right-wing networks. Many of the same false claims and misleading narratives we covered in our real-time analysis fed the Trump administration's meta-narrative of widespread election fraud. Right-wing groups friendly to the President's cause filed lawsuits that built on these narratives as purported evidence of the illegitimacy of the election.

One prominent example of this behavior is exemplified in the false—now re-canted —affidavit provided by an Erie, Pennsylvania, post office worker and publicized by Project Veritas.[32]

Initially, the sworn affidavit contained allegations that the USPS had repeat-edly backdated ballots—claiming that as evidence of widespread fraud. Later, the worker went on record with the House Oversight Committee to recant his allegation (though Project Veritas denies the veracity of his recantation).[33] De-spite the fallout, the air of legitimacy attached to a legal document may benefit proponents of online disinformation campaigns and reinforce the "truth" of a particular narrative.[34]

In another case, also in Pennsylvania, Republican representative Mike Kelly filed a state lawsuit that challenged the constitutionality of the state's 2019 mail-in voting statute. In its statement of facts, the original complaint discussed a number of unsupported claims that had circulated throughout online commu-nities, including, for example, claims about "unsolicited ballots" (¶56–57) and an attempt by the 2019 Pennsylvania legislature to subvert the legitimacy of future elections by setting in motion a plan to shift to universal mail-in voting (¶82–84).[35] The Pennsylvania Commonwealth rejected his claims; on appeal before the Supreme Court, Kelly's action doubly failed.[36] Had Kelly succeeded in

his quest to invalidate the statute, over two million Pennsylvania ballots would have been thrown out.

Finally, a handful of legal actions also incorporated bad statistics common among online proponents of disinformation. One particularly visible example of this phenomenon comes by way of a complaint filed by Sidney Powell,[37] a vocal Trump supporter,[38] in the US District Court for the Northern District of Georgia. Powell filed similar complaints in other key battleground states; all have since been dismissed.[39] In these complaints, Powell's team relied on the misinterpretations and/or misrepresentations of deviations from Benford's Law discussed above.[40] Although experts agree that these deviations are not evidence of electoral fraud,[41] the online misinformation transformed into "IRL" disinformation through Powell's multiple, failed legal actions.

In sum, popular narratives that emerged from these participatory mis- and disinformation dynamics were repeatedly mobilized as "evidence" in the courts. Although the actions brought were often dismissed as baseless, this phenomenon is unlikely to disappear in years to come.

4.4 Summary

The work of producing and spreading misleading narratives about the 2020 election was cross-platform, leveraging diverse platforms in complementary ways to seed, amplify, and mobilize content while adapting around efforts by the platforms to address misinformation. The work was both top-down, with President Trump and right-wing media establishing the initial frames of "voter fraud" and "election rigging," and bottom-up, with armies of volunteers providing content and analysis to develop specific narratives to fit those frames. With his many "RIGGED!" tweets, starting long before the election, and his Army for Trump advertisements, President Trump didn't just prime his audience to be receptive to false narratives of election fraud—he inspired them to produce those narratives and then echoed those false claims back to them. Everyday people, likely motivated by their political views, went online to share content highlighting what they believed to be voting irregularities. Hyperpartisan news and social media influencers played a role in selection, amplification, and framing, assembling the "evidence" of the crowd to fit their narratives and then mobilizing that content across platforms. Those narratives led to real-world efforts in the form of protests and legal action, both of which set the course toward the events at the US Capitol on January 6.

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Notes

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Chapter **5**

Actors and Networks: Repeat Spreaders of Election Misinformation

5.1   Introduction

In this chapter, we look systematically across EIP tickets to trace content across platforms to identify "repeat spreaders"—i.e., individuals and organizations who were repeatedly influential in spreading false and misleading narratives about the 2020 election. We address the following questions:

- Which Twitter accounts, Facebook Pages/Groups, and YouTube channels were most influential in the spread of these narratives?

- What domains were used to host content that was then mobilized through social media in the spread of those narratives?

- Considering the structure of the online discourse, in which communities (networks of accounts) were these repeat spreaders located?

5.2   Methods for Identifying Repeat Spreaders of False and Misleading Narratives

To identify the repeat spreaders, we draw from three complementary views: one from our ticketing and analysis process (described in Chapters 1 and 2); a second through Twitter data EIP partners collected contemporaneously; and a

5. Actors and Networks: Repeat Spreaders of Election Misinformation

third through CrowdTangle and Facebook search functionality, collected after the EIP's real-time analyses ended.

These complementary views allow us to:

- Identify some of the most influential accounts and most widely shared domains on two of the most widely used platforms (Facebook and Twitter).

- Explore, through tracing links in our Facebook and Twitter data, how other widely used social media platforms (like YouTube) fit into these incidents.

- Observe cross-platform connections and sharing practices.

Delineating Election-Integrity Incidents

Through our live ticketing process, analysts identified social media posts and other web-based content related to each ticket, capturing original URLs (as well as screenshots and URLs to archived content). In total, the EIP processed 639 unique tickets and recorded 4,784 unique original URLs.

After our real-time analysis phase ended on November 30, 2020, we grouped tickets into incidents and narratives. We define an incident as an information cascade related to a specific information event. Often, one incident is equivalent to one ticket, but in some cases a small number of tickets mapped to the same information cascade, and we collapsed them. As described in Chapter 3, incidents were then mapped to narratives—the stories that develop around these incidents—where some narratives might include several different incidents.

For tractability, we limited our analysis in this chapter to 181 tickets mapped onto 153 incidents related to the narratives in Chapter 3 and that we determined to either (1) have relatively large spread (>1000 tweets) on Twitter, or (2) be of "high priority" as determined by analysts during our real-time research.

Next, through an iterative process, we identified a keyword-based search string and a time window for each incident that would allow us to capture a comprehensive, low-noise dataset from Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. We also collected data for each incident from YouTube using links to that platform from Twitter.

Collecting Data for Each Incident

Twitter Data Collection

We collected data from Twitter in real time from August 15 through December 12, 2020.[1] Using the Twitter Streaming API,[2] we tracked a variety of election-related terms (e.g., vote, voting, voter, election, election2020, ballots), terms related

to voter fraud claims (e.g., fraud, voterfraud), location terms for battleground states and potentially newsworthy areas (e.g., Detroit, Maricopa), and emergent hashtags (e.g., #stopthesteal, #sharpiegate). The collection resulted in 859 million total tweets.

From this database, we created a subset of tweets associated with each incident, using three methods: (1) tweets recorded in our ticketing process, (2) URLs recorded in our ticketing process, and (3) search strings.

Relying upon our Tier 1 Analysis process (described in Chapter 1), we began with tweets that were directly referenced in a ticket associated with an incident. We also identified (from within our Twitter collection) and included any retweets, quote tweets, and replies to these tweets. Next, we identified tweets in our collection that contained a URL that had been recorded during Tier 1 Analysis as associated with a ticket related to this incident. Finally, we used the search string and time window developed for each incident to identify tweets from within our larger collection that were associated with each election integrity incident.

In total, our incident-related tweet data included 5,888,771 tweets and retweets from ticket status IDs directly, 1,094,115 tweets and retweets collected first from ticket URLs, and 14,914,478 from keyword searches, for a total of 21,897,364 tweets.

Facebook and Instagram Data Collection

To understand how the information ecosystem looks from the perspective of Facebook and Instagram, we collected public posts through the CrowdTangle API from Facebook Groups, Facebook Pages, Facebook verified profiles and public Instagram accounts. We used the same set of incidents, and adapted the search strings to capture comprehensive, low-noise samples for each incident from these platforms. We had to adjust the search strings, often adding additional search criteria (voting- and election-related terms) to bring the results into alignment with our Twitter data, which was already constrained to voting-related data.

5.3   Most Engaged Incidents

The 153 incidents examined varied dramatically in spread, ranging from under 1,000 tweets to over 7 million tweets in a single incident. Overall, the majority of these incidents focused on topics related to delegitimization (110 of the incidents), although several were associated with participation interference (25 incidents) and procedural interference (23 incidents).[3] Table 5.1 enumerates the

ten most prominent incidents (by Twitter spread) with a short description of each.

5.4   Political Alignment of Influential Twitter Accounts

To understand the social structure of Twitter accounts that posted about the United States election, we created a network map[10] of influential accounts and the engaged audiences they share, using retweets as a rough measure of influence. We included two accounts as nodes in our network if at least seven users in our election-related Twitter streams retweeted both accounts at least 20 times each between September 1 and December 1, 2020. In practice, this means that accounts are connected to each other if they share a similar audience of accounts retweeting them. We then identified community clusters within this network,[11] excluding small or unrelated communities.

As displayed in Figure 5.1 on page 186, this pruning left us with two communities broadly aligned with the US political right and left. The right-leaning community was composed of two heavily intertwined communities: (1) prominent right-wing (pro-Trump) influencers in politics, media, and social media; and (2) a community of largely anonymous accounts who were active and vocal supporters of Trump, QAnon, and other right-wing groups. The left-leaning community was focused around left-leaning politicians, pundits, and mainstream news outlets, with satellite communities consisting of users with more socialist politics, and a small group of high-volume, activist users behaviorally similar to the much larger right-wing activist community.

First, we looked at the incident-sharing behavior of the accounts represented in this network, using the community structure to draw meaningful differences. We found that influential accounts associated with the US right shared more incidents than the left both by absolute number (151 vs. 119 tickets) and by the total number of times they were retweeted in these incidents (17.8 million vs. 1.9 million retweets). The majority of incidents were primarily spread by the right-wing communities: right-leaning accounts were retweeted more than left-leaning accounts in 129 incidents, while left-leaning accounts were retweeted more in 23.

Many incident-related tweets from left-leaning accounts were attempting to fact-check, rather than uncritically spread, the false and misleading narratives. In one of the most extreme examples, a false claim made by Michelle Bachman that ballots pre-filled in China were being smuggled into the United States received more spread on the left than the right, solely due to fact-checking behavior. Sometimes, the left-leaning accounts' propensity to fact-check appeared

Incident Title	# of Related Tweets	Description
Dominion Voting Systems: Swing States	7,157,398	This incident accused Dominion Voting Systems software of switching votes in favor of Joe Biden, particularly in swing states like Georgia; as of January 2021, Dominion has filed defamation lawsuits against prominent individuals and media that perpetuated this claim, and some have retracted their stories.[4]
Stop The Steal	2,888,209	This broadly defined incident was based on tweets from verified users broadly supporting the #StopTheSteal narrative, which alleged that certain states were not properly counting votes for President Trump.
Sharpiegate	822,477	This incident falsely claimed that in-person voters in Arizona (believed to be predominantly supporters of President Trump) were given Sharpies to vote with, which the machines would be unable to read, thus causing their votes to be excluded.
Pennsylvania Poll Watcher	618,168	This incident centered on narratives that a GOP-affiliated poll watcher was wrongfully denied entry to a Pennsylvania polling station. This content was then reframed to falsely claim that this was evidence of illegal actions taking place in the polling station. While the video does show a poll watcher being denied, it lacked broader context as to the reason for denial, which was not politically motivated.[5]
Pennsylvania Postal Whistleblower	591,838	This incident centered on footage from Project Veritas showing a postal worker claiming that the post office had ordered him to backdate ballots that arrived after the voting deadline in Pennsylvania. The whistleblower, after being questioned by investigators, later recanted these statements.[6]
Michigan Poll Watcher Whistleblowers	498,366	This incident focused on several whistleblowers from Michigan, some who were poll watchers in Wayne County (home to Detroit), alleging, in a video, various illegal actions by poll workers.
Michigan Dead Voters	486,096	This incident focused on false claims, based on misinterpretations of information on a Michigan government-affiliated website, that dead and implausibly old people had voted in the 2020 election.[7]
Sunrise Zoom Calls	475,581	This incident centered on misleadingly edited video footage that claimed to show federal employees conspiring with the left-leaning environmental activist organization Sunrise Movement to organize a coup, leak information, and shut down Washington, DC.[8]
Nevada Whistleblower	415,614	This incident claimed that a whistleblower who worked for the Clark County Elections Department (which encompasses portions of Las Vegas) had come forward with a list of various "nefarious behaviors." These included falsely claiming that illegitimate ballots were being processed and that people were filling out ballots that were not their own near a Biden/Harris campaign van.
Minnesota Ballot Harvesting	415,570	This incident, seeded by a Project Veritas video, surfaced otherwise unsupported claims of ballot harvesting in Minnesota and attempted to connect those claims to US Representative Ilhan Omar (see discussion in Chapter 3).[9]

Table 5.1: Top 10 most-tweeted incidents in our data.

5. Actors and Networks: Repeat Spreaders of Election Misinformation
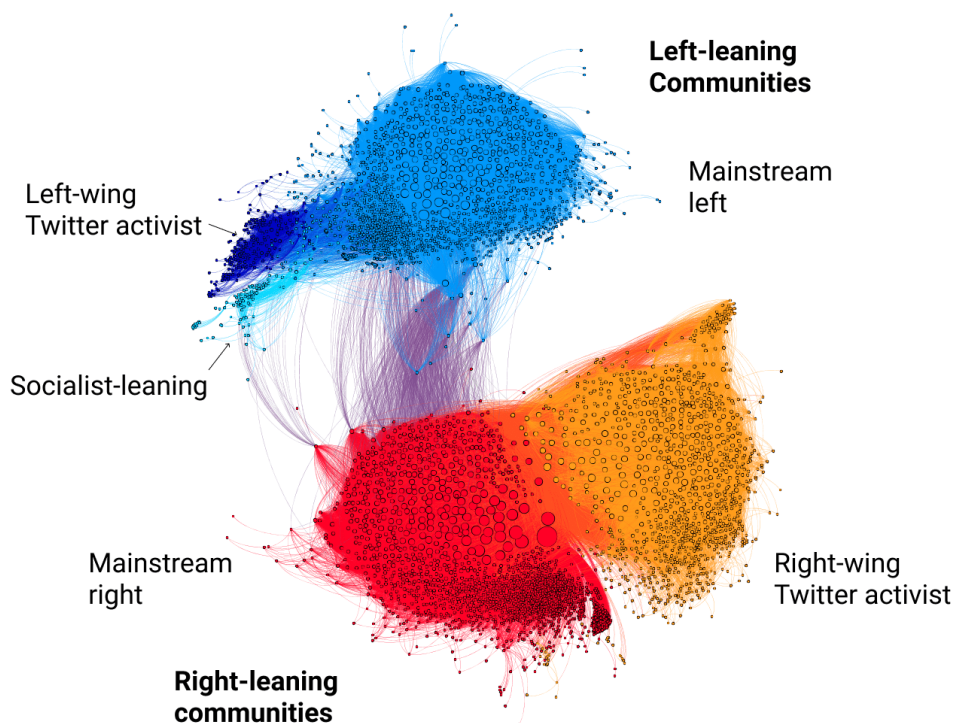

Figure 5.1: A network visualization of influential Twitter accounts from our dataset of election-related tweets collected from September 1 to December 1, 2020.[12] Each node is one Twitter account, and two nodes are linked together if they are retweeted by the same accounts. Two nodes are pulled closer together if they share more accounts, and larger nodes are connected to more accounts. Node colors correspond to automatically determined clusters of users, which broadly split into right- and left-wing communities. Subcommunities include activist accounts on both the left and right, and a socialist-leaning cluster on the left.

to stall the spread of some misleading incidents, such as when the spread of a false claim about ballots being unlawfully rejected in Georgia was significantly slowed after a series of corrective fact-checks. In other incidents, these fact-checks came too late; a check for a similar false claim about undelivered ballots in Florida came more than 24 hours after initial spread, and had no discernible impact on subsequent sharing. There were also instances of misinformation originating and spreading almost solely via left-leaning accounts, such as a video of an overflowing ballot room in Miami-Dade implying that Postmaster General DeJoy was hiding ballots for Biden in the critical county, as well as some incidents in which both the right and left participated, such as the mail-dumping incident in Glendale, California, described in Chapter 3.[13]

Influential accounts on the political right, by contrast, rarely engaged in fact-checking behavior, and were responsible for the most widely spread incidents